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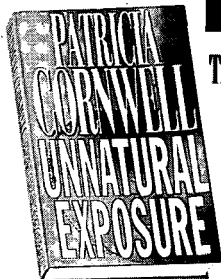
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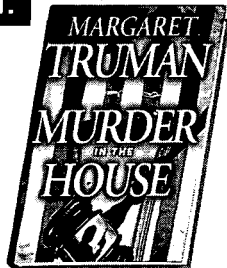
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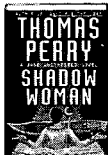
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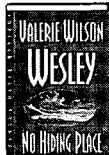
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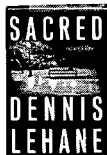
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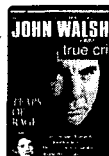
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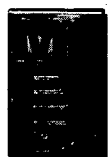
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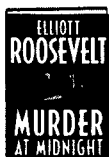
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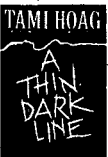
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 42, No. 12, December, 1997. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$33.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 1997 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. GST #R123054108.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Joel Kostman

NOTE: *We came upon Joel Kostman some months ago when his adventures as a locksmith in New York were written up in the Times. "Only in New York . . ." is a catch phrase here, and Mr. Kostman's view of the city as he goes about town keeping burglars and other evildoers outside the door brings home once again New York's unlikely and often amusing ways. We thought our readers would enjoy following Mr. Kostman on a few of his calls. Here is one of them.*—ED.

THE NAKED CITY

The guy on the car radio says the windchill factor is thirty-five below. I wipe the inside of the windshield clear with the palm of my hand. The defroster can't keep up.

"Friends," he says, "if you don't have to go out, don't."

I have to. It's my job.

I am driving down East 14th Street. It's ten o'clock at night. The N in the red neon sign of Julian's billiard parlor is out. The pool hall has switched genders. There's a line in front of the Palladium. This absolutely confirms my belief that at any time of day, regardless of the conditions, there is, somewhere in this town, a line.

"It was eighty-three degrees in L.A. today, kiddos," the radio guy says.

I flash my middle finger at the dashboard.

"Yeah," I say, "but they never get real winter there."

"Why don't you all just take your clothes off, settle into a nice warm bath, and spend the night with me," he says.

I cross Third Avenue and spot a parking space across the street. A quick U-turn and I park right in front of my destina-

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tion. Small favors. I take a deep breath, turn the engine off, and step out into the arctic blast.

"I got crack, I got ludes, I got reefer."

A tall dark man, bundled up in a coat and a hooded sweat-shirt, is standing in the doorway. He is bouncing in place to keep warm.

"What you need, man?" he asks.

"I need you to move so I can buzz," I say, trying at the last second to make the sentence sound like a request.

He steps slightly to the side.

"I got somethin' here will warm you right up," he says.

I find the right button and press it. I haven't taken my eyes off the guy. There's a buzz, and I push the door open.

"Maybe somethin' on the way out," the guy says.

"Yeah. How about a cup of hot tea," I say.

I start walking up the stairs. He yells after me, "Lemon or milk?"

On the fourth floor there are two art posters hanging on the wall, a Cezanne still life and a Gauguin Tahiti scene. They are attached with pushpins. In between them in a two by three foot wooden frame is a dingy old painting, a surrealistic landscape, almost Escheresque. It shows a pier jutting out into a

body of water with a line of pilings that evolve into trees and eventually transform into monsters. A small, lone figure is standing out at the edge of the pier staring off into the mist. I look at it for awhile. Then I find the right door and knock. After a few seconds I knock again.

"I'm comin'," a gruff voice says. "Jesus."

The door opens, and a totally naked, very old man is standing in front of me.

"Yeah?" he asks.

I stare at his face.

"I'm . . . a locksmith," I say.

"No shit?" he says. "I'm a brain surgeon. What can I do for you?"

He looks like Popeye. He's bald, and his cheeks are puffed out. His chin is a tiny U that hangs beneath them.

"Who's there, George?" a voice calls from inside.

The man turns his head, and I quickly look at the rest of his body. He is rail thin. His skin sags off his skeleton in small folded layers from his chest down to his waist, as though he's melting.

"Who the hell'd you say you were?" he asks, turning back to me.

"Locksmith," I say.

"He says he's a locksmith," George calls over his shoulder.

"Let him in, George. I called him."

George takes a step back. "Jesus," he says. "Nobody tells me anything."

I step into the kitchen, a space about ten feet square. On the other side of the room, leading to the front of the apartment, is an archway filled with hanging vertical strands of purple glass beads. Dishes are piled up next to the sink. There are two frying pans and two sauce-pans on the stove top. It smells like a wonderful meal was just cooked. To my right, the valve at the top of the heat riser is hissing loudly. The moist, intense warmth of the room feels great.

George closes the door.

"I'll be with you in a minute," the voice calls from the other room. I hear more voices, all men, and the clicking of what might be poker chips.

George is smoking a cigarette now. He leans back against the counter and blows perfect smoke rings up into the air. I can see the veins in his legs. He reaches over and picks a string bean off one of the plates and pops it into his mouth. He takes a puff while still chewing.

"They never tell me anything," he says to me.

I make a knowing, empathetic face.

On the wall over his shoulder is a painting much like the landscape in the hallway. In this one, a chain of mountains

gradually metamorphoses into devil-like creatures spitting fire down on a few deer that are leaping away in the lower right-hand corner.

"Well, now, thanks for waiting."

A second naked old man walks through the beaded archway. "And thanks for coming out on such a brutal night," he says.

He has the opposite physique from George's. A large potbelly, flabby thighs, lots of body hair. What is going on here? I wonder.

"Nobody ever tells me anything, Frank," George says. He sounds sad, almost hurt.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, George. I told you three times I called a locksmith. I almost couldn't get in tonight. What happens if you have another stroke and we can't get in? You want us to just let you die?"

"Yeah, George," someone calls from the other room, "use your damn head and stop being so sensitive. Come on back and finish your cake."

George grunts and turns on the water faucet. He holds his cigarette under the flow, then flicks the butt into a bag next to the table.

"You guys are worse than my wife," he says and walks through the archway into the other room.

*

Twenty minutes later I am finished with the job. I call out, "All done." There's no answer. They're listening to music in the other room. Mozart, I think.

"Fellas? I'm finished."

"Just come on back," a voice answers.

I'm reluctant to venture any farther into an apartment filled with old naked guys, maybe cradling Satan dolls or sacrificing chickens. But finally I decide that since they're so old, maybe even octogenarians, they're harmless. Why they're walking around naked is a mystery.

I put on my coat and step through the beads. I'm in a dark bedroom large enough only for the mattress and a night table. There is another archway, this one beaded in yellow, and I step through that into a small office area, where there is a desk with a computer on it, a file cabinet, and shelves full of books.

"Keep coming," the voice says.

One more crossing, green this time, and I have traversed the railroad apartment into the caboose, a dimly lit living room. The fat man is sitting on a couch between two more naked, ancient men. George is in a chair to their left. They all have the bored looks of people at the end of a long city council meeting. I lay a set of keys on the coffee table in front of them.

"Six, right?" the fat man asks.

"Six," I say.

"Excellent. Want some cake?"

"That's okay, I . . ."

"Try it," he says, holding out a plate. "William made it." He tilts his head toward a fifth naked senior citizen I hadn't even noticed who is standing by the window at the end of the room holding a record in his hands. He is enormous, much larger than the fat man on the couch. He has a full head of shiny white hair and a thick beard.

William nods and smiles at me.

"It's a torte," he says.

"William worked for years as a bakery chef," the man to the fat man's left says. "It's excellent."

I decide that even if they all descended on me at once, I could probably escape the apartment with little difficulty. I accept the plate.

"Sit down." The fat man motions to the chair at my elbow.

"I don't mind standing," I say.

"Please. There's another chair here," William says.

I sit.

They are all staring at me. Except for George, who is slumped in his chair, nodding off. I look around the room. It is neat and orderly, the furniture worn but intact. There are two small paintings on the wall over

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the couch done in the same style as the others.

The fat man sees me looking. "George did those," he says.

"Years ago," William adds. "In his dark period. Before Carol."

"We all believe he would have made it had he kept at it," the fat man says.

"Absolutely," the man to the fat man's left says.

William nods.

I take a bite of the cake. It is delicious.

"Coffee?" the fat man asks.

"Why not. I'll have some coffee."

"Milk and sugar?"

"Just milk."

He pours it for me and hands it across the table.

"William was just about to put on some more music. Do you like Mozart?" the fat man asks.

"I love Mozart," I say. "This is very good, by the way." I point my fork at the cake.

"Told you," the man to the left of the fat man says.

The music begins. The fat man pours more coffee for himself. He lifts the pot and offers it around to each of his friends. No one is interested. George has fallen asleep in his chair. The fat man puts the pot down and whispers to the group, "I think he's doing remarkably well."

"Me too," William says. He

carries the extra chair over and puts it down between me and George, closer to me.

He says, "He's a tough old guy. He'll be okay."

We listen to the Mozart. I sip my coffee. The fat man's eyes are closed while he holds his coffee cup in front of his mouth. He hums lightly along with the music. William is staring at George. The other two men look like lifeless wax figures.

After a minute or two William says, "What's your schedule like tomorrow, Fred?"

"I've got to take Betty to the doctor's in the afternoon," he replies. "I'm good for the morning."

"Why don't you just sleep here, then," the fat man says. "That would be easier. It's so damn cold out there."

"Nah. I'll just come back. Betty doesn't like to wake up alone. George'll be all right. I can get here around nine."

"I'll take the afternoon," William says.

"Good," the fat man says. "What about tomorrow night? Fritz?"

The man to the fat man's right nods.

"I'm free all day Wednesday," the fat man says. "That covers it until Thursday. We'll work out the rest of the week by phone."

There is a prolonged silence

during which they all appear to become absorbed again in the music. Then William turns to me and asks, "Are you married?"

"Yes," I say.

"Wonderful. Kids?"

"Yes. Two girls."

"Wonderful. How old?"

"Eight and one."

"Cherish them."

"I will. I do."

"All of us here are grandfathers," he says. "Fred has a four-year-old great-granddaughter, I believe."

"Six," the man on the fat man's left says.

"Six already," William shakes his head.

He looks at me and says, "It goes so fast. Before you know it, it's over." He leans toward me and whispers, "George's wife just died. We're keeping him company."

The fat man suddenly struggles to his feet and says,

"Speaking of wives." He steps out from behind the coffee table. "I told Emmie I'd be home by midnight." He walks across the room and opens a closet door.

"Henpecked," the man at the end of the couch says. It is the first thing he has uttered since I entered the room.

George lets out a series of snores. They all laugh. The fat man comes over to me and hands me some money.

"Thank you," he says. "Stay warm."

I stand. Everyone else except for George also stands. I realize that I have stopped wondering why they are all without clothes.

"The Naked City" and Mr. Kostman's other adventures have just been collected in his book Keys to the City: Tales of a New York City Locksmith, published by DK Ink (October 1997).

FICTION

THE HEATER

Gail Etheridge

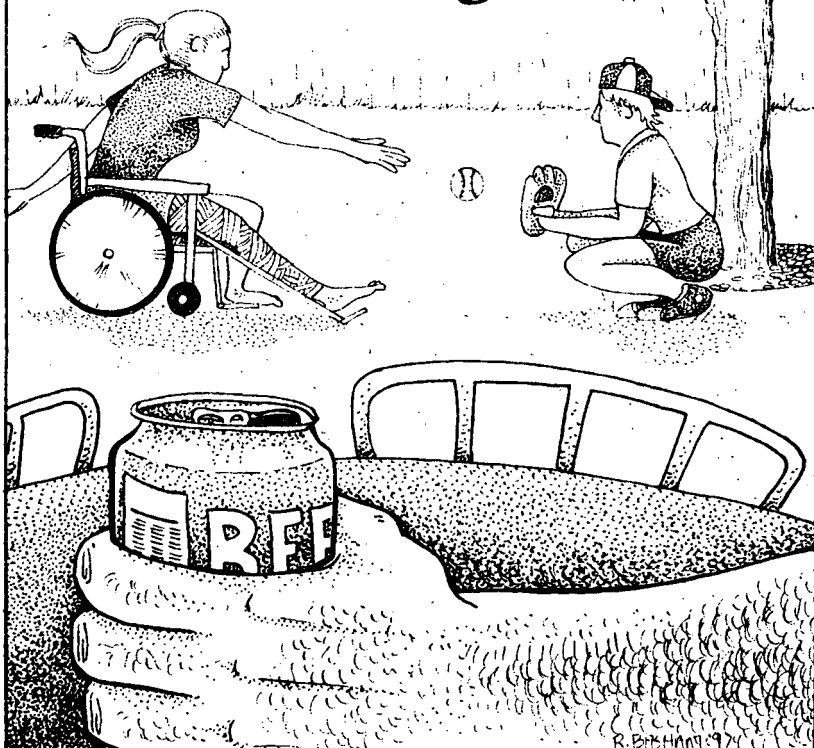


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“Yo, babel!” I yell, voice caroming off the high cedar fence that encloses the yard. “Blow this kitten away with your heater!”

I am squatting forty feet from Judy Jansen, presenting my catcher’s mitt as target. A dustpan is home plate. Instead of bestriding a pitcher’s mound, Judy sits in a wheelchair.

Back in April, a drunken punk joyriding in a stolen car side-swiped Judy while she was jogging, breaking her hip and knocking her into a drainage ditch. Luckily for Judy, the ditch was lined with nothing but slime and mud. Nearly five months and one corrective surgery later, Judy’s hip and leg are in a cast, propped on an aluminum rest attached to the wheelchair. The punk who hit her is doing hard time in Angola, but that won’t help Judy walk again. Time and therapy may accomplish that—if she’s lucky.

Throwing a softball hard and accurately without the support and thrust of your legs is extremely tough, much tougher than me pegging the ball to a base from a crouch. But like the gutsy gal she’s always been, Judy has become expert at it during regular practices with me over the summer. Now she is delivering pitches nearly as

sharp as the ones that brought our Savgood Hornets a championship. The drawback is she’s developing the upper-torso musculature of a weightlifter and it might be hard for her to go back to a normal pitching motion when and if her hip is functional again.

Judy rubs sweat from her brow with the back of her forearm. Then, with something like her old slingshot delivery, she zips a pretty hot fastball across the center of the dustpan. “Stee-rak three!” I shout, impersonating an umpire thumbing the imaginary batter out. “Next victim!”

Judy grins at me, her cornflower blue eyes twinkling. I grin back.

“Do you have to scream, Velma?” Bud Jansen, Judy’s husband, pauses in his inspection tour of the back yard to frown at me. He’s a tall bozo with what some women, obviously including Judy, consider rugged good looks. His slacks are neatly creased, but the collar of his white shirt is wilted and the armpits are soggy with sweat. Bud is the only man I know who wears a shirt and tie at home on Labor Day weekend. He doesn’t want you to forget he’s an executive, owner-manager of Discreet Personal Finance Company, which has an office on Commerce Street downtown and is

about to open a branch in Monroe. From the airs he puts on, you might think Bud was a lawyer or a surgeon instead of a lousy usurer.

I pull my sticky sweatshirt away from my ribs and flap it a few times in a futile attempt to cool off. The sky is wavy zinc, the air sultry. The weather service says a tropical storm is heading in from the Gulf.

I return Bud's frown. Why shouldn't I yell? The fence helps contain the noise, and anyway, all the neighbors are away for the weekend except old lady Russelot, who's deaf as a store mannequin and probably couldn't hear me over the racket of her TV and air conditioner even if she weren't. The only person I'm annoying is Bud, and that suits me fine.

As I toss the ball back to Judy, Bud turns away and kicks at some fallen leaves. He stares at a tall, dying holly tree near the back of the house, then looks at his watch. "Wally's due any minute. He'll be working out here. Why don't you two go to the park or else play in Velma's yard?"

Judy is frowning. Creases and crow's-feet have invaded her fair skin over the summer. Seeing them makes me angrier at Bud.

"The park will be jammed, and Goose's yard isn't suitable," Judy tells Bud. "You know

damned well I had the fence put up so we could practice here without chasing loose balls."

Bud pulls out a handkerchief and pats his face with it. "The fence doesn't just keep softballs in, it keeps breezes out. It's like a Turkish bath back here."

Then why don't you sashay over to Labelle Boudreau's place and cool off? I think this but keep my mouth shut for Judy's sake. To my mind there's nothing more contemptible than a man who jumps into bed with another woman when his wife is injured and needs him most.

"When Wally gets here you'll have to stop while he does the yard," Bud grumbles.

"Why bother Wally on Labor Day weekend?" Judy asks. "The yard can wait."

"A couple is coming to look at the house Tuesday," Bud says, avoiding Judy's eyes. "I want the place to look sharp. I'm having Wally prune that tree and clean the leaves out of the roof gutter so we don't have another waterfall back here when that storm moves in."

Judy shakes her head. "I told you, I don't want to sell the house."

Bud attempts a smile. "Maybe you'll change your mind if they make us a good offer. It would make sense for you to move into a place that's wheel-

chair-accessible. And I won't need a house here while I'm in Monroe helping Miss Boudreau get the new office on its feet."

And helping Miss Boudreau off her feet, I think. I'm hip to Bud's game. He wants to cash in his share of the property before Judy gets sick of his monkeyshines and files for divorce.

"Heads up, Jude!" I toss her the ball. "Let's get our rhythm back. Show me that slider."

Judy gloves the ball, scowls at Bud's back as he goes inside, then drinks from a thermos next to her wheelchair.

"I don't feel like practicing any more today, Goose."

I sigh, ease out of my crouch, and approach Judy. Being player-manager of the Savgood Hornets is no bed of roses. Last year Judy pitched three shutouts, something unprecedented in the local women's softball league, and we edged out the Pronto-Lube Lady Greasemonkeys for the title. This season we finished third as I struggled with the wildness of Judy's replacement. I am trying to bring Judy back to form, not only because the team needs her but because she desperately needs to get her confidence back.

Even dripping with sweat and with her corn-colored hair dangling in loops from the hem of her cap, Judy is beautiful. She has traits I'm devoid of—fair

complexion, height, slenderness, grace. My last name is Swan, but I'm totally unswanlike, which is why Judy and my other pals call me Goose.

"C'mon, Jude, don't let Bud get you down. You've come a long way. You're getting good movement on the ball, you're hitting the corners, and you've almost got your old heater back. Keep training and you'll be ready to pitch again next season."

"You're not doing Judy any favor by getting her hopes up, Velma." Bud has come onto the patio with a can of beer. "Be realistic, Judy. You're crippled. You may never play softball again."

"You miserable craphead!" I shout. Judy wheels herself between us to keep me from punching Bud. "Isn't it bad enough you're cheating on Jude? Are you trying to make her feel totally useless? Who the hell are you to pronounce her a cripple? Where'd you get your medical degree, you crummy loan-shark?"

Bud sets his beer on the patio table and tries to maneuver around Judy and get at me. I stand my ground. Nature has designed me to be a catcher—or a stevedore, which is practically my job description at the Savgood warehouse.

Bud stops and glares at me.

“Who the hell are you to come onto my property and insult me?”

“I’m Jude’s best friend, that’s who.”

“You’re a goddamned busybody, and I want you to haul your dumpy ass out of here.”

“Stop it, both of you!” Judy’s cheeks are red, her blue eyes blazing. Buddy-boy has said the wrong things. “Bud, Goose is here to help me practice, and I’d appreciate it if you’d just leave us the hell alone.”

Bud grabs his beer and goes inside, slamming the back door.

I hang my head and say, “Sorry, Jude. I was out of line.”

“Not at all, Goose. Don’t you think I’ve known about that slut? Come on, let’s practice.”

I resume my position, and Judy tosses a few warmups. Then I begin to guide her through an imaginary women’s league all-star lineup.

“Now batting, the left fielder, Maud Cooper,” I announce in my P.A. voice. I flash Judy the sign for a slider. Her pitch scoots just off the outside corner, where Maud Cooper would probably foul it off.

“Stee-rak one! Yo, babe! Show this pussycat your heater!” But instead of a fastball, I signal for a curve. Judy breaks a beauty off the inside corner. “Stee-rak two!” We waste a pitch outside. Then I signal for the heater, and

Judy delivers a hard one belt-high on the inside corner. In my role of umpire I tell Maud, “You’re outa there!”

While we’re working on the next batter, Bud emerges from the house again. He’s now wearing Bermuda shorts and T-shirt and swigging another beer. He pulls on a pair of work gloves and trudges to the toolshed near the back fence. It appears that Wally, the yard man, has decided not to sacrifice his holiday.

“Now batting, the shortstop, Bess Green.”

While we set Bess up with off-speed sliders followed by a fastball, then strike her out with a dipping curve, Bud carries an extension ladder toward the house. Grunting, he gets the ladder braced against an upper crotch of the holly tree; then he sits on the patio and finishes his beer.

“Now batting, the third baseman, Gwen Lazarus.”

Judy’s flushed face is set in total concentration as she reads my signs and pitches to each batter’s limitations. She is throwing better than she has since the punk ran her down. Her fastballs get hotter and hotter, whacking my mitt like bullets.

A sharp metallic rasp distracts me for a moment. Bud is filing the blade of a hatchet.

"Yo, babe! This kitten can't even see the ball! Punch her out!"

"Grown women acting like a couple of brainless kids," Bud says. We ignore him.

"Stee-rak three! Next case!"

"Two pathetic examples of arrested development." Bud tends to become snotty after a couple of drinks.

"Now batting, the left fielder, Lorraine Johnson."

"Goose! What a name." Bud makes honking noises as he climbs the ladder clutching his hatchet. Too bad he's wearing gloves. I hope the spines of the holly leaves stab through them and draw blood.

"Ball one. Keep the ball down, Jude!"

"*Keep the ball down, Jude. I'm your best friend, Jude.* Why the hell don't you find a boyfriend, *Goose*? There must be some chump in town who likes 'em squat and homely." Bud is near the top of the ladder now. He grips the tree with one hand and chops at a branch that overhangs the roof.

"Stee-rak! Way to go, Jude!"

"Or maybe you don't like boys. Is that your hangup, *Goose*?" Bud honks again, then goes back to hacking the branch.

"Stee-rak three! You're outa there!"

"Do you have a yen for other girls, *Goose*?"

"The batter is the first baseman, Lily Anderson."

"Do you get your jollies latching onto a pretty woman and trying to run her life?" Bud brushes woodchips from his arm and chops at the branch again.

I won't dignify Bud's garbage with a reaction. I signal for a slider. Judy nicks the outside corner. "Stee-rak one!"

"Moving into her neighborhood, practically camping at her house, trying to turn her against her husband."

I signal for a curve. Judy breaks off a lulu. "Stee-rak two!"

"Trying to build her ego up, filling her mind with pipe dreams."

Judy's slider is high. "Ball one. One-and-two the count."

"'Ready for next season!' What a bunch of malarkey! What'll she do, pitch from a god-damned wheelchair?"

"Yo, babe! This turkey couldn't hit her grandma with a tennis racquet! Blow her out of there with your heater!"

Judy twists and hurls the ball toward the upper branches of the holly tree. Packed cowhide whacks bone.

Bud flops like a scarecrow in a stiff wind, bangs his face against a branch, and topples. He smacks the rungs of the ladder, does a cartwheel, and hits the ground face first with a crunch

like the sound of a cleaver chopping through a head of cabbage.

"Jesus, Jude!" I gasp.

The yard is still. All I hear is the roar of old Mrs. Russelot's air conditioner. Judy sits petrified, staring at the fallen Bud.

I tiptoe over and look at Bud. His head is twisted around like that little girl's in *The Exorcist* and so battered that I can't tell where Judy's fastball struck him.

The ball lies among holly leaves, near the fallen hatchet. I pick it up and examine it with the critical eye of a home plate ump. There's a dark red splotch on one seam.

"This ball goes out of play. I'll hide it at my house and bring another used one."

Judy shifts her gaze from

Bud's body to my hand holding the ball. She wrinkles her forehead like a schoolgirl confronting an algebra problem.

Drumming startles me. Raindrops tattoo the aluminum patio canopy and thump my cap and shoulders. Judy sits there like she doesn't notice. I wheel her onto the patio.

"Don't pick up the phone until I get back with another ball, okay?"

She comes out of her trance far enough to mutter, "Okay, Goose."

I lean close, gripping her shoulder. "That was one hell of a pitch, Jude. You've definitely got the old heater back."

Her baby blues focus on my face. She grins shyly and whispers, "Yo, babe."

FICTION

NOVEMBER NIGHTS: ONCE UPON A DARKLING

Gene KoKayKo &
Sherrie Brown



Illustration by Linda Weatherly

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 12/97

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On a wind, ghostly, October had blown from Cambria out toward the sea. November had crept in on cat's feet of fog, a wispy lace as fragile to walk through as cotton candy. Rube felt the soft damp prickle of the stuff against his face as he walked Buddy to the beach.

"Not so damned fast," Rube said.

But the big dog had sniffed something through the fog, and he now lumbered down the steep path to the beach.

"If I lose you in this fog, you're on your own," Rube called. "You can get back home by yourself."

Silence.

"And the cars will get you."

More silence.

"And the tourists."

Wroof.

"Aha."

Rube plunged toward the sound. As he moved blindly down the fog-laden slope, he prayed. Not for firm footing against a fall but that the dog would not dig anything up. Especially a body. Twice now the big Lab had almost gotten Rube killed.

"Chase birds or something safe," Rube called as he struck the bottom. Sand billowed beneath his sneakered feet like a loose rug. He slid a bit, up to his ankles, then leaned over with

his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

The surf pounded through the fog.

Waves crashed on an invisible shore.

Like a huge heartbeat.

The smell of brine lodged in his senses as somewhere a great bird wheeled. Rube could hear its call. Not a gull but a circling hawk lost and alone. Silly and romantic thought, he supposed. More likely it was a turkey buzzard. In the air they were graceful and beautiful, sleek as a hawk or eagle. But on the ground they were ungainly and ugly, meatpicking scavengers that haunted the refuse piles left by tourists.

An offshore breeze blew the brine from his nose and cleared the beach for a space of yards, and Rube saw Buddy rummaging in a clump of kelp. Rube's heart almost stopped. But then the big dog lifted his nose and sniffed the air and moved on, searching some invisible trail along the shore.

Rube followed out of habit.

He came across the sea's leavings. Shells and crushed imprints of starfish and one lonely shoeprint. One foot in the water, he wondered, for the print was clearly the right foot and only the right foot. Going forward, he saw a line of them down the beach. The fog blew

about the edges of the incoming waves, and he had to watch the ebb and tide of the surf carefully or be splashed with the occasional big wave. Whoever it was had had one foot in the water as he ran. But the curling fog and the creeping water made it hard to see. He stopped finally and knelt down to get a better look at the water's edge.

If he were a real detective like Sherlock Holmes, he'd be able to tell everything about the one who'd left these prints: his sex, age, height, weight, what he'd had for breakfast, and what kind of cigarettes he smoked. All Rube could tell was that the prints were left by a human wearing shoes.

Could he tell what kind of shoes? He leaned over farther, but that was bad timing—that was when the big one rushed the shore and he found himself in a squat, unable to move fast as it crested and caught him chest-high. Like a cold, wet wall, the water shoved Rube back off his feet and onto his haunches in the wet sand.

"Jesus Jehoshaphat!" he swore.

The water receded, leaving him plumped down in the wet sand. Something wet and huge licked his neck.

"Thank you, Buddy."

Wroof.

And Buddy moved away.

Rube saw the wave this time and scuttled backwards like a crab. It only wet his feet. He stood and shook his wet pants. His feet squished in his shoes.

"Lost the tracks," he said, feeling sheepish, staring now quickly up and down the beach to see if anyone was watching.

But the beach was deserted. Behind him Buddy had started back toward the trail that led uphill to the road.

"May as well," Rube said, following the big dog.

Buddy led the way home, lumbering from East Village to West. Coming out of his office, Sheriff Boggert almost tripped over the dog.

"Damn," he started, then caught his balance and looked up to see Rube smiling at him.

"You," Boggert pointed, "I wanna see."

The smile fell from Rube's face as Boggert backtracked into his tiny office without another word.

Rube stood in the doorway, looking through. The new paint job had turned out rather nicely, he thought, and John had a new hunting print up behind his desk.

Boggert was leaning over his In tray, digging for something.

"Sit down. What're you waiting for?"

"Did I break a law or something?"

Boggert looked up. Then he smiled. "Naw, of course not. Just get in here and sit down. This is private stuff."

Rube looked for Buddy, but the big dog was begging at the bakery next door. He'd found an unsuspecting tourist and had the little man up against the bench beside the door.

"Does he bite?" the man asked.

Rube shook his head. "Just feed him something. Anything."

The man nodded nervously, and Rube went inside Boggert's office thinking he needed to buy a leash. But he hated to—

"Sit down, Rube."

"You're looking well, John," Rube said with a smile.

Boggert took a deep breath and seemed to settle down. "Okay. I'm surly as hell. But this bugs me."

Rube sat and smiled, waiting.

Boggert looked up and caught the smile. "What's wrong with your face. You gotta toothache or something?"

Rube made a rude noise and let the smile falter. "Hell, I was just practicing."

"What? Looking foolish?"

"No," Rube said. "I was watching this new show on cable, on self improvement, about how we all could be better and more positive neighbors by just wearing a smile."

The sheriff shook his head in disgust. "You need more to do,"

he said. He had finally found the papers he was looking for and now shuffled his way through the small stack. "You know what this is?"

"No, but you're gonna tell me, right?"

"This is—" He faltered as he read. "The wrong damn file, that's what it is." Boggert slammed it down in the wire cage and picked up the next. "Why did that woman have to go and get pregnant on me?"

Rube lifted his eyebrows.

"No," Boggert said. "My secretary. Only part-time but she's on maternity leave and I can't find diddly."

Just sitting there was boring, and Rube had decided to tell John about the strange footprints and his lack of observation about them when John found the right file. His mouth went off as he opened it up, and he said, "She ran away, by God"

"Who did?"

"Cindy Mitchem. The little girl who saved your butt last time out."

Rube's smile faded for good this time.

"But—she's in the custody of Social Services, that new half-way house they have, and she was being transferred to a foster home. I talked with her last week, and she seemed very ex-

cited about going to school and being with other kids and . . . ”

“Nevertheless,” Boggett said, and tapped the file loudly with his forefinger. He passed it over to Rube. “You’re still an actin’ deputy, so you can see this.”

Rube read.

Boggett talked on.

“I’ll give ’em credit. At least they called. She only ran away yesterday, so they’re right on it.”

Rube looked up. “This is just . . . gobbledygook, a psychiatric report and background stuff.”

“Well, they think she’s pretty disturbed. Understandable, I guess, with her crazy mother and drugs and all.”

The State of California in all its wisdom had placed Cindy Mitchem in a halfway house until she could be reassigned to a more permanent state home, or with foster parents. According to the visiting psychiatrist and the social worker, Cindy was adjusting, but very slowly.

“Well, Jesus Jehoshaphat,” Rube muttered as he read. “What did they expect?” Cindy Mitchem had spent most of her eleven years as a drugged prisoner, her mother so frightened of her leaving that she’d put tranquilizers in the child’s food. And then the mother had murdered Cindy’s only childhood friend. And then Cindy had plonked her mother over the head with a shovel. Which was very good for

Rube and Buddy, who were at the time looking down the wrong end of the woman’s double-barreled shotgun.

“Adjustments indeed.” Then he read the next page.

“I thought they were sending her to school. This says the children’s ward at Bayview. That’s a mental hospital, isn’t it?”

Boggett nodded.

“Did she know this?”

Boggett shrugged. “They probably told her she wouldn’t be going to school, yes.”

“No wonder she ran away.”

Rube was suddenly furious, up and out of his chair. He could feel the heat in his cheeks and the rising sound of his voice sounded extra loud in the tiny office.

“Just—just settle down, Rube.”

“The hell!” Rube exploded. “That kid deserves more than being tucked away somewhere in a loony bin.”

“Ah, Rube. They aren’t loony bins any more. And they have classes, I’m sure.”

“She’s a special kid, John.”

Boggett sat down hard in his big leather chair. “I know. Sara Jane thought so, too.”

Rube felt himself clenching and unclenching his teeth so hard his jaw hurt.

“Did you read the rest?” Boggett asked.

Rube’s eyes dropped back to the file.

"Jesus," he muttered. "They think maybe she left because her real father called? They don't know but they think?"

Boggert had his hands up, halfway between a shrug and surrender.

"I don't know, Rube."

"Well, dammit, find her," Rube said.

John Boggert stared at him. Hard at first, the way he might an enemy or prisoner, but they'd been through too much together in too short a time and the look wouldn't hold.

"I wouldn't know where to start," he said. "And it's not in my jurisdiction."

Rube sat back in his chair. It was stupid to get this angry at Boggert. It wasn't his fault. And it wasn't really Boggert's job to find her. It was his. He was responsible. If he hadn't shown up in her life, she'd still be with her mother.

"Okay, John," he said, standing. "I've gotta go. Thanks for the information."

John's voice caught him at the door. "You're still a deputy, you know."

Rube turned. "You wouldn't mind if I—"

"Do what you have to. But keep in touch." Boggert leaned over the desk with the file. "And take this. You might find something useful. Just get it back to me sometime. And

don't tell Deputy Dillon."

Rube grinned, but it wasn't the cable show's version of being a good neighbor. It was more a grin of thanks, if there was such a thing, to a friend.

Buddy paced the deck behind the house while Rube read, as if the big dog sensed Rube's uneasiness. Rube read and took notes and read it all again. The reports were long and detailed. And wrong.

They were treating Cindy Mitchem as if she were some set of figures, some equation they could solve with their mumbo-jumbo and their witchery.

She was a little girl.

She was frightened and confused and she'd been drugged and treated like bad emotional baggage, but there was nothing really wrong with her. Rube was sure of it. He'd spent two days with her, keeping her at his house after she'd gotten out of the hospital while Social Services dithered around, trying to figure out who had responsibility.

"I should have just kept her here," Rube said to no one.

Buddy stopped pacing and sat on his haunches and looked over at Rube.

Wroof, he said.

But somewhere deep in his mind another voice spoke. "What if you're wrong?"

Eleshia's voice of reason, the one his wife had always used when he went off half cocked. He'd thought it dead, was sure it had died with her.

"No," he murmured. "I'm a silly old man, but I'm not wrong."

Anyway, it wasn't the point. The point was simply that out there was a missing eleven-year-old girl. She was scared and confused and running all alone. He had to find her.

Rube piled Buddy in the old car and headed down Coast 1. South. You could go north or south or inland. The other direction landed one in the sea. Rube enjoyed the drive, taking his time, doing fifty-five. Cars passed him as though he were standing still.

He had no trouble finding the halfway house in San Luis Obispo; it was right off the highway. And they let him enter cordially, with a smile. But then he got stalled.

"Runaways are regrettable, but they're a fact of life in halfway houses," he was told by Matthew Lannes. "The San Luis police have been notified about Cindy. So why are you here?"

"First," Rube said, "I'm a friend. Second, I've been appointed by Sheriff Boggert to look into this, since Cindy lived in Cambria. Third, I wasn't aware that concern about an

eleven-year-old child had geographical bounds. I'm not here to cast blame but to find out where Cindy went. Do you have any information not in her file?"

The man's look was stony. "No."

"May I see her room?" Rube tried to lock gazes with Matthew Lannes, but he was already looking out the open door and calling to someone outside.

A girl of fourteen poked her head through the door. "Yeah?"

"This is Mr. Rubekowski, a friend of Cindy Mitchem's. Show him her room, will you? Nice meeting you, Mr. Rubekowski," and Matthew Lannes was out the door and gone.

Rube followed the girl to the stairway.

"I'm sorry," Rube said. "He didn't tell me your name."

"Tadpole," the girl said, and Rube had to blink. But before he asked the obvious question, she explained.

"'Cause I was so little when I was born, and my parents experimented on me with stuff."

Not knowing what to say about that, Rube moved on to something else. "Matthew Lannes—is he new here?"

"Nah—he's been here a couple of months, but he only works two afternoons a week. Community service for something he did. Nothing major—probably just parking tickets or some-

thing. Anything big they wouldn't have put him with us. So he's here, but he's not really into it, you know?"

"Yeah," Rube said, thinking wonderful, whatever happened to dedicated and trained volunteers? He asked his next question.

"Did you know Cindy?"

"Not much. I saw her around, but we didn't talk or anything. You should ask the kids in the rooms next to hers. They'll know more. I'll introduce you."

"Thank you, I'd appreciate that."

They reached Cindy's room, and Tadpole left him alone as he went in. The room was small, a somber green, the walls covered with inspirational posters with slogans below smiling faces of sports and television celebrities. None of the posters belonged to Cindy. He'd asked her last week during their visit. They'd come with the room.

"Yeah, mister? Tad said you wanted to talk to us?"

There were three youngsters in the doorway, two girls and a boy, ages ranging from nine to thirteen.

Rube nodded. "Please come in. I wanted to ask if any of you know about phone calls Cindy received from or made to her father, Sam Mitchem."

One of the girls answered. "She got letters from him.

They'd come in the afternoon, and she'd run up here to read them. She wrote back. I looked in once to tell her dinner was almost ready, and she was writing one then, she told me."

"How many letters?" Rube asked.

"Only two that I know of, but she wasn't here very long," the girl said.

The boy, who had more patches of freckles than years, added, "One of the letters was about a phone call. She was sitting out in the hallway by the phone one time when I passed by, and she said she was waiting for a call. She had a letter in her hand and said her dad had written that he'd call her between two and three."

"Did he call?" Rube asked, and the second girl nodded.

"Yeah. I heard the phone ring, stuck my head out my door, and saw Cindy answer it. She was on for about ten minutes."

"What day was that?"

"Monday," the boy answered.

Monday afternoon she'd spoken with her father, and Thursday morning she ran away.

"Did any of you happen to hear the conversation?"

"Nah," they all said. "We don't get much privacy, so we try to give it to each other."

"Did any of you talk much with Cindy?"

The oldest girl answered. "No,

they put her in with me first, but she said I talked too much and asked for her own room. They gave her this one. She mostly stayed in here and wrote and sang to herself. She said I talked too much, but there she was, always singing under her breath. We mostly left her alone, 'cause word went round she was going to Psychland. Are you the guy with the big yellow dog she talked about?"

A bell rang somewhere before Rube could answer, and the children all scrambled out the door, saying goodbye as they left. Getting up from Cindy's bed, Rube searched the dresser drawers but found nothing. Having gone with Cindy back to her mother's house to collect her belongings so she could stay at his house, he wasn't surprised. He'd been appalled at the tiny cubicle walled off by packing boxes that marked Cindy's room, the mattress on the floor and a much abused dresser against the wall. She'd only had one change of clothes besides what she was wearing, and the only other thing she'd taken from her mother's house was—

Rube went back to the half-way house's version of a dresser and pulled it away from the wall. Just as she'd done at her mother's house, Cindy had a large manila envelope taped to the back. He sighed with relief

when he pulled out the sheaf of papers.

Cindy hadn't taken her songs with her—that was a sign that she hadn't run away permanently but only for a visit. If she were leaving for good, she'd have taken her work with her. But there were no letters.

Rube put the papers inside his jacket and left, going outside to the old Ford four-door he'd recently bought with plenty of room in back and front for Buddy.

For once, the yellow Lab was where he'd left him. Rube drove a block to a drive-thru for hamburgers and found a nearby park to sit in and eat, giving Buddy his share of the food. The old dog wolfed his food down, eyed Rube's, and then ran off to make friends with all the children in the park. Only after he'd wiped his hands and mouth did Rube pull out the papers.

He'd often heard Cindy sing but had never seen how she wrote out her lyrics. In addition to the penciled words, she'd drawn rough sketches of scenes. Rube read songs influenced by his taking her on beach walks with Buddy. Songs about the sea, about feeling overwhelmed and being swept over by the tide; about being left behind, high and dry in a tidepool, unable to get out. In the distance a stationary lighthouse, solid and permanent,

sent out a flashing warm, yellow light that promised guidance and safety.

Rube was amazed at her vocabulary, not to mention her symbolism, intended or not. The next batch of songs were also about the sea, but about storms and a ship showing up in the distance, coming in fast and sleek, that rescued her from a desert island. The boat's name was *Schooner*, and Rube wondered why that sounded so familiar. And how soon after receiving letters from her father she had written the ship songs. He wondered whether Sam wrote half as well as his daughter did. Had he arranged to pick Cindy up, or had she taken it upon herself to go to him?

Rube went to the public bathroom to wash his hands, and at the pay phone outside he opened the phone book. There was reason to hope that Rose Marie, her mother, phobic about Cindy's leaving her, had drummed it into her daughter's head never to take rides from strangers. So he doubted she'd hitchhike. But what about a taxi? Would she consider a taxi driver a stranger? Perhaps the police had checked with the taxi companies, but it wasn't mentioned in the report. And Rube knew Cindy would have the money for a taxi. He'd given her forty dollars the week before, suggesting she treat the

other children to a movie at the theater down the street. Which she'd obviously not done.

The first listing was Axis Cab Service.

"Hello, I'm trying to trace a runaway child, who might have called for one of your taxis early Thursday morning. The address would have been 1010 Beechnut Avenue, at the halfway house. Do your records show such a call?"

It took several minutes for the dispatcher to check and come back to tell Rube that no such request had been made. A couple was now standing behind him waiting to use the phone. He hung up and went in search of Buddy.

He found him giving two toddlers pony rides, a teenage girl supervising the event.

"Hey, mister, I hope you don't mind but your dog seemed friendly, and I'm babysitting these two and they were getting bored with stories."

The grin on Buddy's face let Rube know there was no injury to his pride, and the smears of chocolate on the toddlers' faces let him know Buddy had ulterior motives.

"No problem at all, but Buddy and I have to be heading home. I'll help with the dismounts."

Rube lifted the first child high, jiggled him a bit, and was rewarded with a giggle. The

babysitter reached for the second child, but she screamed, "No, not you, want dog man to pick me up!"

Rube obliged and was rewarded with a very sticky kiss.

"Come on, Buddy, time to go home."

The time normally devoted to his garden Rube spent with his phone book, going through listing after listing. Bargain Cabs hadn't picked up any little girl, Carousel Cabs said they didn't deal with minors. Rube turned the page and blinked at the number of listings. Just how many taxi services were there in the county? And just where did they get their names? He scanned the advertisements until one caught his eye.

For a Song Taxi Service.

Cindy would have no preference, may have skimmed the names as he just had, and would have favored that name. Rube dialed the number.

"Hello, For a Song Taxi Service. How may we help?"

"My name is Barney Rube-kowski, and I'm helping the police find a little girl who may have called your company early Thursday morning for a pickup at 1010 Beechnut, San Luis, at the halfway house for kids. Do you have a record of such a call?"

"Please hold, it will take a minute to check."

The radio station being played on the hold button was not in tune, and the static started giving Rube a headache before the dispatcher came back on, much more than a minute later.

"Sorry that took so long, I had other calls coming in, and the log for Thursday wasn't where it should be. Yes, we did have a call for a pickup on Beechnut Thursday morning, but it was for 1016. Cabbie reported it was a little girl, dark hair with a backpack. Kid had the money, so he took her."

"Took her where?"

"Paso Robles. The log says he dropped her off in front of the Chamber of Commerce. That was it. Kid paid in cash, no problem. My driver's not accused of anything, is he?"

"No, nothing like that," Rube assured him. "I just wanted to make sure she left of her own free will and find out where she went. Thank you very much for the information."

Fixing his dinner, Rube debated whether or not to call John Boggert with an update. Buddy lay at his feet, his brown eyes following every movement Rube's hands made, just in case he dropped something. Rube obligingly dropped a cubed carrot that the dog snuffled and then pawed to the side.

"What would be the point?" Rube said aloud. "The most he

could do is notify the county sheriff, who'd send men into the bars looking for Sam Mitchem and scare him off. No, I say we can do a bit more ourselves before we call in the professionals. What flavor do you want for your dinner, beef or lamb?"

Gauging the amount of tail wagging, Rube opened the can of lamb dogfood and dumped it into Buddy's food dish, which had begun life as a mixing bowl. Only then could he concentrate on his own dinner, which contained a lot less meat than his companion's.

Rube recalled the conversation he'd had with Boggert in the hospital about Sam Mitchem. Sam was a talented musician and singer who would travel about and play the local bars and saloons, eventually going off on a bender and not coming home for several days. Rose Marie got phobic about his disappearances and was positive Cindy would take after her father and leave her, too. And she had, but not in the way Rose Marie had envisioned.

"If Sam is back in the area—he's not in town—he'd be spotted for sure, and with Cindy's taking a cab to Paso, that narrows the field for us. As far as I've heard, Sam has never held a steady job, so he'll be playing at various bars. No, my friend, we can either drive to Paso our-

selves tonight and hit every bar, cocktail lounge, saloon, and tavern, making fools of ourselves, or we can take advantage of modern machinery and phone all those watering holes and ask what the weekend's entertainment is to be. That way we only have to embarrass ourselves at one place. Sound like a plan to you?"

Buddy's only response was to push his bowl aside and roll to one side to begin searching for fleas. Rube averted his gaze.

"Point taken. You don't embarrass in public easily, but I do. Back to the phone book."

Phone books were amazing things, Rube thought; they told you so much about an area. Granted, Paso Robles was considerably larger than Cambria, but he was still surprised at the number of bars, lounges, and restaurants that offered musical entertainment.

"First we make a list with their phone numbers, and then we call them. Very logical—Sherlock would be proud of me."

He'd almost finished the list when he came to a bar named Schooner's Galley. Rube reached for Cindy's songs, and smoothed out the last sheet. Yes, there it was, the *Schooner* appearing from the mists to rescue her from the desert island. Rube squinted at the number and dialed it.

"Yeah, Schooner's Galley." Rock music blared from the receiver, and from the sound of the voice, the answerer had the phone tucked under his chin to keep his hands free. The bartender, most likely.

"I'm calling to ask about your entertainment for this weekend. Will Sam Mitchem be playing and singing?"

"Not any more. Last weekend was his last show here. To tell you the truth, we asked him to leave and not come back. Anything else I can help you with? We're having the Banshees here tonight."

"Ah . . . thank you. Do you know where Sam's moved on to?"

"Don't know and don't care as long as he doesn't show his face in here. He causes too many fights. I gotta go, I've got customers here." Rube was hung up on.

"Oh well, so much for divine intervention from songs. I guess it's the old fashioned way."

On the sixth call he got the information he wanted.

"Yes, Sam's playing here. He's due to start at seven thirty and play until midnight. You wanna leave a message?"

"No, thank you. My wife just wanted to be sure he was playing. She likes his music."

"Don't all the women. He'll be here tonight and tomorrow night."

Rube looked at his associate. "Well, Mr. Buddy, do you feel like going for a ride? We can check out the music at Fred's Hole in the Wall."

"Wroof," said his associate.

Rube found his local maps and checked the roads first. This would be his first long night drive in awhile, and he didn't want to have a mishap now of all times. Forty-six was long and winding, but it was a straight enough route to Paso Robles. No problem.

Buddy enjoyed the ride much more than the human, hanging his head out the passenger side window the entire way and grinning into the wind. He barked in response to every car that honked behind Rube or honked again in passing. Rube kept his eyes on the road and ignored all suggestions to speed up. He wasn't going to go over the speed limit; let them all pass him or take their time getting to wherever they were hell-bent upon. This was an unfamiliar road, and he was taking it slowly in the dark no matter who honked and hollered at him as they passed.

The off-ramp led him straight to the main street of Paso. With the bar's address in his head he found it without difficulty. Parking the car, he debated whether to leave Buddy in the car, since they weren't in Cambria any

more where everyone knew the dog. But he knew the odds were that even if he left Buddy in a locked car, the Lab would somehow get out and find him. Besides, they were partners, weren't they?

"Come on, boy, but try to stay close, will you?"

The big Lab just gave him a look like who do you think you're talking to and headed off across the street. Rube hastened after him to find Fred's Hole in the Wall open but, since it was only ten minutes past seven, without Sam Mitchem.

"Come on, boy, let's take a little walk." Rube took a turn at the corner and went two blocks to Schooner's Galley. The music he'd heard over the phone was being played live by a quartet of unhappy women—or maybe their glaring was part of the act. Rube made his way to the bar, leaving Buddy at the door.

"Excuse me, I called earlier about Sam Mitchem. Could you tell me why he was asked to leave?"

The bartender gave Rube the once-over with a practiced eye.

"You ain't a cop?"

"Me? No. I'm just looking for Mr. Mitchem. I'm a friend of his daughter, and she's disappeared. I was hoping Sam could tell me if he'd seen her."

"Daughter. Didn't know he had a daughter, although the

way he messes with women it shouldn't surprise me that he's got kids all over the place. That's why we made him leave. He was only here two nights, but the women he messed with, the men he made mad, we had more fights here last weekend than we've had in six months. Troublemaker that one. I hope he don't have a kid with him. He'd sell it for money. He had the shakes so bad he had to down a gallon of booze to get his hands steady enough to play the guitar. Most of the crowd didn't notice, but I play a bit and I could tell. He's still good although his voice is going."

"Do you happen to know where he's staying?"

"Nope, but I heard he's playing at Fred's tonight. You might check there."

"Thanks," Rube said and started to turn away but the man's cough made him turn back. Rube blinked a few times at the bartender's raised eyebrow and his glance at the counter. Then he saw the tip jar. "Oh," was all he could manage. He dug out his wallet and put a ten inside the jar.

"Detecting could get expensive, Buddy," Rube told his partner as they headed back the way they'd come. "Between feeding you and paying off informants, my retirement fund will expire fast."

The music had indeed started by the time they reached Fred's Hole in the Wall. The open space that served as a stage was small, a bit away from the bar and to the side. A tall stool was occupied by a man with a much-traveled guitar, loose brown pants, and a gray knitted fisherman's sweater, but his head was bare, bent over his instrument, the black curls showing a scattering of gray that only added to his attractiveness.

Sitting up straight, Sam Mitchem smiled at the crowd and launched into his next song, one Rube had never heard before but the crowd had, since many started swaying and clapping their hands as he sang and played.

He was handsome, Rube had to give him that; a man in his mid-fifties who must have spent his life wandering to acquire the type of tan not found on those who frequent tanning salons. His eyes were a startling blue in the brown face, a face with many character lines around the mouth and eyes. What had Rose Marie said?—that her Sam was a charmer with his Irish face and Irish tongue and his wandering feet that never kept him in one place for long. He'd wandered from Rose Marie to Eva Surbol in Cambria, and who knew who else had fallen to his charm.

Rube moved in closer. By the time the first set was finished, he'd seen that some of the character lines were scars and the nose would have been a lot redder if it weren't for the tan. The signs of dissipation were there but not showing much yet. As he sang the slow songs, the love songs, he directed them to the ladies in the bar, making each one a personal invitation, and Rube could see why there were numerous fights wherever Sam played. He was a bantam rooster walking into another rooster's run, crowing to all around, trying to gather attention and favors. The local roosters would not be as charmed by his voice and playing as the ladies would.

Sam had put his guitar down and picked up a glass at the bar when Rube approached him.

"Sam Mitchem?"

The blue eyes took him in, estimated the amount of trouble, and nodded to the stool next to him.

"My name is Barney Rubekowski. I'm a friend of Cindy's, and I'm looking for her. She's run away from the place where she was staying, and I'm concerned. Is she staying with you?"

The blue eyes narrowed and scanned the background. "Maybe, maybe not. She is my daughter. Ah, now I've placed you; you're the dog man Cindy told me about. The one Rosie didn't

nail with the shotgun. I've had that gun pointed at me a few times, I can tell you. Pity she broke down so bad, being put away, having Cindy put in a home. No place for a kid."

"So she is here with you?"

"Didn't say that, did I? I've talked to her on the phone, written a few letters. She told me what was going on, since I'm her only kin. 'Course I can't take her on, I'm on the road all the time performing—that's no place for a kid. Told her so. She sent me some songs of hers, said she wants to sing her own songs. She's my kid all right. Got some talent. Maybe when she's older we'll do an act together, but for now she's too young. Don't know where she is, if she ain't in the home. Can't help you."

It was abrupt, but it sounded true enough. Still, Rube knew how this man could lie, knew from Rose Marie's life and had met Eva Surbol, a very collected lady. If Sam could take Eva in, he was a very smooth liar.

"Is that all you have to say?" Rube asked.

Sam shrugged. "What else is there to say? I don't have her, don't know where she is. If she's missing, she'll turn up. The police here may not put much sweat into it this weekend what with the tourists about and all, but come Monday they'll start looking. By the end of the week

I'm sure she'll be where she's supposed to be. 'Scuse me, I've got to go play some more."

Rube stepped away, listened to one more song, and left.

When he emerged from Fred's, Buddy was missing. A month ago he would have panicked and assumed the worst. Now he just went around the back side of the building to the rear entrance of the bar. The door stood open with heat and cooking smells emanating outward. Knocking on the door jamb, Rube entered to find Buddy sprawled on the floor at the feet of an enormous woman who was flipping hamburgers. Buddy looked at her with adoring eyes, and from the shininess of his chops, she'd returned his attentions.

"Ah, excuse me, I've come for the dog. I'm sorry if he's bothered you."

The woman beamed a smile that transformed her face into the happiest Rube had ever seen.

"No, bother at all. Would you like a hamburger?"

"No, thank you, I had dinner before I left. I would like to ask a few questions, though."

A Hispanic youth came through the swinging door from the main bar area and scowled when he saw Rube.

"Hey, mister, that man you asked, he does have a little girl

with him. I saw them earlier over at the Steak Out."

The woman paused in mid-hamburger flip, and Buddy's head rose in anticipation.

"Oh, you talking about Sam Mitchem and that little girl? I saw them this afternoon, too, when I was cooking at the Steak Out. Thought the kid was a bit too young for him. Though there are sickies who like them that young."

"It's his daughter," Rube said. "You have another job during the day cooking hamburgers?"

"Yes, I do. I need the money, and besides, I love the smell of hamburger grease. And the smiles on people's faces after they eat one of my burgers. I make great burgers. Are you sure you don't want one?"

"Positive," Rube said, "but thank you." The hamburger that had been offered him dropped but never hit the floor. Buddy woofed and licked his now greasier chops.

"About Sam and the little girl. Was she eleven years old, dark hair, hazel eyes? Very soft voice?"

"That sounds like her. What do you want with her?" The woman was still smiling but her eyes were sharp, and Rube knew if she didn't like his answer he could go whistling for any more information.

"We both live in Cambria, and I'm a friend of hers. Her mother was recently incarcerated, and I heard Cindy'd run away to look for her father. I'm checking on her, well, because I'm not sure Sam's responsible enough to look after her."

The two laughed, woman and young man. "You have that right, mister. My name is Nellie. That's Marcos. Sam has the girl all right, but not here. Management don't allow kids in the place. At least not at night. Licensing and all that."

"Do you know where he's staying?" Rube was overly warm in the kitchen and was sure that if he stayed much longer Buddy would eat enough to make himself sick in the car on the way home.

"No, I don't," Nellie said, but Marcos's "yes" came at the same time. Rube looked at the young man.

"I checked him out, man, because he was putting the moves on Lucinda. Like he does on all the girls. He told Lucinda where he's staying so she could visit him."

"Where's he staying?"

Marcos sighed. "It's easier to show you, man, than tell. Here." He went to the door and stepped outside. Rube followed, grateful to be in the fresh air. Marcos pointed.

"See across and down the

street, the fire hydrant by the bicycle shop?"

"Yes."

"There's an alleyway right there. You go down that, and about four buildings down there's some white stairs that go up above the Old Time Antiques store. He's up there."

"Thank you, I appreciate it." Rube then remembered his partner. Inside the kitchen Nellie was smiling again.

"I don't think Buddy wants to leave."

Rube looked at her in surprise. "How did you know his name?"

"Oh, everybody knows Buddy. I haven't seen him in awhile, though. This is the farthest I've seen him wander without his owners. Are you watching him for them?"

Rube, realizing she hadn't heard about Jesse and Betty's deaths, didn't want to go into it, or his part in it all. "Yes, I am. He didn't walk, though, he caught a ride with me."

"That's good. You run along, Buddy, and stay out of traffic." Nellie nudged the Lab, and the old dog lumbered out after Rube.

As they headed down the street, Rube wondered how far away he'd have to take Buddy before he was no longer known. A vision of Buddy wandering into New York traffic made him

shudder. No, he'd come to California to retire, here he'd stay. Even if it wasn't turning out to be as peaceful a retirement as he'd hoped.

The alleyway was dark, but Rube's worst fear was that he would step in something nasty before he reached the stairs. He eyed the rickety structure and tested a foot on the lowest step. *Crrreeek*. He looked at Buddy, who grinned, then started his procedure of turning three times before collapsing to the ground.

"Are you trying to tell me I'm going in circles?" Rube put his hand on what passed as the stair rail. *Crrreeek*. "Tell me something I don't know. Wait here."

No wroof this time, just the Lab putting his head down on his lion-sized paws.

At the top of the stairs Rube didn't have to worry about picking any locks. The door was ajar, and he pushed it open slowly.

"Hello?" His eyes narrowed in the gloom. "Is anyone here? Cindy—it's me, Rube. Buddy's here, too. Are you in here?"

No answer, so he felt to the left until his hand encountered the light switch. A single unshaded overhead bulb came on revealing a living room with a kitchenette off to one side and a door opposite opening into

the bathroom. A small hallway apparently led to the bedroom.

The living room was a mess. On the kitchen counter sat an open can of chili beans, a spoon stuck inside, and Rube hoped that wasn't what Sam Mitchem had provided for Cindy's dinner. Another few steps and Rube could see that no one was hiding in the bedroom or bathroom. In the living room lay Cindy's backpack, and several of the papers scattered about the table and floor had her childish writing on them. She'd been writing songs again.

Standing still for a moment, Rube felt the chill and emptiness of the rooms, along with the odors of alcohol and garbage. No wonder the child hadn't stayed here. But where had she gone? Out to wander the town, or to find her father again?

"Circles indeed," Rube muttered as he started retracing his steps, stopping to look at the fresh pad of paper on the arm of the couch next to the side table with the telephone. Rube picked it up and glanced at the idle doodlings that bespoke someone talking on the telephone.

As he scanned down the page, his blood ran cold, and his eyes saw as much red as was reflected in 'animals' at night. At the bottom of the pad was written:

*San Francisco: Calvin Talbert
405-555-3699*

Cindy \$\$\$

\$10,000

*Monday pickup, Anderson's
Motel off 101.*

"The bastard," Rube said, and his hands itched with the memory of a harpoon he'd hurled at madness once before. Peeling off the top page, he folded it and put it inside his jacket pocket. Retrieving Cindy's backpack, he went out onto the small landing, closing the door behind him. He creaked down the steps, stepping over the old dog at the bottom. "No wonder Boggert wanted to make me a deputy. Do all his running around for him. This must be part of the detective process, Buddy. Going in circles. Turning over rocks and finding all the nasty bugs that exist in the world. Shall we complete another circle and head back to Fred's?"

The dog didn't budge.

"And of course Nellie's hamburgers in the back room."

Buddy lumbered to his feet and started down the alley.

They were two doors away from Fred's when Rube heard the sounds of fighting instead of music. People were in the doorway, but he couldn't tell whether they'd stepped in to see the fun or were ready to make a fast exit if it turned ugly.

"Excuse me, excuse me," he murmured, but the bystanders weren't moving. He stepped back. "Buddy—*inside*. Food."

The huge Lab darted forward, his horse-sized head butting against people's hips to nudge them aside, and when the people felt, then saw, what was bumping them, they got out of the way. Rube followed on Buddy's tail, the metronomic wag of it clearing a path wide enough for two people.

It was even darker inside than earlier, whether for atmosphere or to save the electric bill he didn't know but Rube felt as if he'd been swallowed by a whale. If he'd been swallowed, he wasn't alone.

There were so many people it took him a moment to find the combatants and then determine that there were two men fighting Sam. Two women stood at the edge of the crowd, a blonde and a redhead, with excitement on their faces. One man, thirtyish, was wrestling Sam over a table, but even as Rube watched, Sam punched the man in the gut, then kneed him to the floor. While Sam was catching his breath, the second man, in his late twenties, struck with a left hook to Sam's face. The crowd roared their approval. Rube and Buddy got closer, Rube scanning the room near the walls and then, thinking like

a small child, looking along the floor.

There she was. Huddled beneath a corner table, knees curled up to chest, arms wrapped around her knees, rocking back and forth but not taking her eyes off the fight, and those eyes were as big as saucers. It was Cindy.

"Jesus Jehoshaphat," Rube said. He tried to work his way around the crowd to the child but kept getting blocked. Frustrated, he crouched down next to Buddy's head, pointing the Lab's nose in Cindy's direction.

"Buddy, see Cindy? See Cindy?" He pitched his voice up, the lilt catching the dog's attention, and the dog's old eyes searched the crowd until he caught sight of his one-time playmate. The careworn tail, just growing fur back that had been gnawed off by raccoons and other dogs, started wagging and almost threw Rube off his feet.

"Go to Cindy. Say hi. Maybe she'll take you for a *walk*." That did it. The Lab headed through the mass of people, weaving his way among them or simply pushing bodies aside.

Cindy saw him coming and took her eyes off the fight. When Buddy reached her, she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his fur. Good.

Rube turned back to the fight. It hadn't gotten any prettier. Sam was definitely losing although he was still throwing punches. But the two younger men were taking turns hitting him hard. As Rube started towards them, he saw Sam take another blow to the face.

As if his looks were more important than his pride, Sam went berserk and started throwing haymakers. The two younger men stepped back, and without thinking about what he was doing, Rube stepped into the combat zone between the men and Sam Mitchem.

"Please, please stop this. It's ridiculous. He's twenty years older than you." When he wanted to say hit him harder!

"He started it, mister. Made comments to our dates."

"Comments!" Someone from the crowd hooted. "He came on to them, man, right in front of you!" Laughter.

The younger man's face reddened, and he tried to go around Rube to get at Sam but Rube blocked him.

"Get out of my way, mister. This has nothing to do with you."

Rube held his hands out.

"I can't let you beat up on him no matter how much he deserves it, and I'm not saying he doesn't."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because his little girl is over there watching the entire thing, terrified. It won't help her to watch her father beaten bloody in front of her."

That made them both pause and glance around. "You mean he's brought a kid in here? And still hit on women? What a lowlife!"

Rube, who couldn't agree more, spared a glance towards the table. Cindy's eyes, huge with fear, showed over Buddy's neck.

"He's just an old drunk who doesn't know any better and is trying to prove he still has it. He's not worth it. You both know you could take him—"

The look on their faces almost warned him, but Rube was still taken unawares when Sam Mitchem reared up behind him and charged Rube from the back, sending him sprawling straight into the arms of the younger man. He pushed Rube away.

"See, man, I told you he's asking for it!"

Rube turned to see Sam weaving on his feet, both hands up in the air in front of him.

"Call me old, will you, you dried up piece of blubber. Tell me I'm not worth it—I'll bloody your face. Come on!"

Rube blinked, suddenly seeing himself on the barroom floor with a bloody nose, trying to explain it to John Boggert. The

sheriff would call him a tourist, Rube just knew it.

"I, uh—" he began, and then Sam Mitchem lunged at him.

A blur of gold streaked across the room, and before Rube could believe it, Sam Mitchem was dancing with a giant Labrador who, standing on his hind feet, was as tall as Sam was.

"Wroof," Buddy said, and down Sam went, either through the sheer weight of the dog or the power of canine breath, Rube wasn't sure which. The end result was Mitchem flat on his back, Buddy pinning him down with his paws on Sam's midsection.

The crowd behind Rube lost no time.

"Quick! While the dog has him down, grab him and toss him out the door!"

With perfect timing Buddy turned his head and let his jaws open wide, his snout curling up in one of his sidesplitting, jaw-cracking yawns that showed every tooth in his head and the wide expanse of his gullet. He licked his chops and lay down right across Mitchem, watching the crowd.

That display had a miraculously calming effect on the crowd. Rube made a mental note to buy some teeth cleansing biscuits for the old dog. He knew Buddy's exhibition meant he was hungry and tired after his

display of brawn and wanted to be rewarded. He wasn't about to tell the customers at Fred's Hole-in-the-Wall that, of course.

"Ah, good dog," was all Rube said, and he and the rest of the clientele were rewarded with a Buddy grin.

Voices from the doorway called out.

"All right, clear the way. Break it up," and people around the bar, to the murmured word "police," shifted and started moving away from Sam.

The two officers, neither of whom Rube recognized, came in, took one look at Sam on the ground, and then located the two men with blood on their faces.

"What's going on here?"

The redheaded woman who'd been one of the objects of Sam's attention spoke up.

"That man on the floor, the guitar player, started it. We were sitting at our table minding our own business when he made lewd comments about me and Priscilla. He kept getting worse, so Chuck and Craig, they had to defend our honor, didn't they?"

The officer took in the low-cut outfits the women were wearing and refrained from comment. Priscilla chimed in.

"But that man there stopped the fight. Him and his dog." She pointed straight at Rube, shift-

ing the officers' attention to him, and he smiled weakly at them.

"Did you sic Buddy on him, mister?"

Rube blinked. "Why no, officer. Mr. Mitchem grew upset over my attempts to stop the fight and pushed me from behind. Buddy came over and, uh, leaned against him, and Mr. Mitchem went down, being somewhat unsteady on his feet." Only after he uttered this report did he realize the police had used Buddy's name. Did everyone in this county know the dog?

The senior officer went over to where Mitchem still lay. "Buddy, get off the man. You'll squash him. Sam, this is the third time this week; we'll have to take you in."

Buddy obliged, tail wagging, stopping only long enough to collect a pat on the head from the officer before lumbering over to see how Rube was. The second officer tilted his head to look at Rube.

"And where do you come into this, sir?"

"I only came in to look for Cindy Mitchem, Sam's daughter. She's run away, and I thought she might have come looking for Sam." Rube pointed to where Cindy still hid beneath a table. "She's over there. But I went looking first at the rooms Sam's taken, and I found this piece of paper by the phone." Rube took

out the page and handed it to the officer. He read it, and his eyebrows went up quite a bit, his gaze traveling from Cindy to Sam Mitchem before coming back to Rube. "May I take her home now? I think Sam's proved he's unable to take care of his daughter."

The mention of Cindy stirred Mitchem, and he sat up, looking blearily around. Rube realized the drunk musician hadn't even known his daughter was in the bar.

"Cindy, where are you? That's my wittle darkling . . ." His voice was slurred from drink or blows to the mouth or both. "I mean that's my little daughter. I didn't ask her to come here, but she's kinda like your dog, mister. I called and she came, following me around."

Rube felt the urge to tell Buddy to attack. The senior officer called out to his partner, "Cuff him. Then go take statements from the two fighters." He turned his attention back to Rube.

"And you would be . . . Barney Rubekowski, wouldn't you, sir?"

Rube gulped. "How did you know that? And how do you know Buddy? You don't patrol Cambria, do you?"

"No, sir," he smiled. "Everybody knows Buddy, and besides, we got a memo about you last month from Sheriff Boggert

while he was in the hospital. Letting us know he'd deputized you in case you turned up anywhere. He said you'd taken over Buddy."

"Or vice versa," Rube muttered. To the officer he said, "Do you mind if I take Cindy home now? I'll gladly come in to the station tomorrow and make a statement."

The police officer smiled. "I think that will be necessary, with the evidence you just handed me. We know where Sam's rooms are, we've escorted him there a few times already. But for now, yes, go ahead and take the little girl home. This is no place for her."

Rube grabbed Buddy by the collar and went to where Cindy still hid beneath the table. He knelt down, turning his head aside when Buddy stuck his own face in. Definitely he needed dog biscuits.

"Cindy, it's okay now. You want to come home with me?" He held his hand out, and she took it long enough to crawl out. When she stood, looking to where the police officers were pulling her father up in preparation for taking him in, Mitchem glared at Rube.

"Watchu doing weeth my gerl—that's my daughter, my darkling darling—"

Cindy grabbed Rube's hand and practically dragged him to

the door. Buddy followed behind, presenting the bar crowd and Sam Mitchem with a display of his bowlegged rear.

Outside in the fresh air Rube took a deep breath. There was a tugging at his hand, and he looked down into Cindy's eyes.

"Can we go home now?" she whispered.

Rube nodded. "Yes, we can go home."

"What do you mean, I can't give Cindy a home?" Rube demanded. "You people couldn't keep her, didn't even try to find her another home or give a damn about her. You were going to send her to a loony bin! Why can't I give her a home?"

Mrs. Wilkins of the Child Welfare Department had on her best "you're not going to like what I say but it's in your best interest" look.

"Now, Mr. Rubekowski, I've told you we've reevaluated Cindy's psych profile, thanks to your input and the song samples you provided us with. She'll not be going to Bayview, but she will stay with us until we find a proper home to place her in. You've proved that her father can never have her."

"Why not with me?" Rube repeated. "I like her, she likes me, and she feels safe and secure with me and Buddy. I have

enough money to provide for her—”

“Money is not the issue, Mr. Rubekowski. No one is saying you wouldn’t be a wonderful provider for Cindy; we just think we should try for something . . . better for her.”

“What’s wrong with me?” Rube asked. “Lay it on the table.”

She let him have it.

“You are a single, widowed male, sixty-two years old. You’ve never had children, never been around them by your own testimony. Cindy has suffered most of her trauma because of abnormal family circumstances; we feel it best if she’s placed in a two-parent home with parents a bit younger than you and with other children her age to associate with and learn from. You would be an excellent guardian for her, Mr. Rubekowski. Not a family.”

Then Lannes of the halfway house chimed in. “And that’s not mentioning all the bodies.”

“I beg your pardon?” Rube asked, noticing that John Bogert had pushed his chair back so far he was almost out of the room.

“According to our reports, you’ve been in town three months and you’ve been linked with . . . how many bodies is it? Betty Sturgis, whose body you found on the beach; her fiancé Jesse—”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Rube interrupted. “Jesse was dead a week before I got to town.” Lannes continued as if he hadn’t heard a word Rube said.

“Then there was the captain you harpooned and killed in self-defense, and after that was the complete breakdown of Rose Marie Mitchem and the discovery of one Tammy Martin’s body by you—”

“I didn’t find her,” Rube told him, “it was Buddy. He’s always digging things up . . .” He quit when he heard himself.

“Exactly. Since you’ve hit town, there are three bodies that we know of and other disasters. You mean well, of course, but you must take these facts into account when you’re being weighed for foster-parenting. A child needs normality and quiet. Can you provide those?”

Rube glared at the man but got his anger under control. “So you’re telling me you’ll hold onto Cindy until you can put her with a two-parent family with lots of kids who’ll give her company and support, love, and understanding.”

“Exactly,” both Lannes and Wilkins said at once.

“And how long do you think that will take?”

“We don’t know for sure, of course; there are many children within the system looking for such homes. It could take only a

matter of weeks, or perhaps a few months—”

“Or years,” Rube finished.

“Yes, or even years. The system isn’t perfect, Mr. Rube-kowski, but it is what we have to deal with. We appreciate the effort you’ve put forth to help Cindy, as does she. Do you have anything to add, Sheriff Boggert?”

“Who, me?” the sheriff said, dragging his attention from the window. “Not a thing. I had my say earlier, and you didn’t pay any attention to me then. Rube-kowski knows what I think.”

There was a pause while the officials waited for an elaboration and finally realizing there wasn’t going to be one rose from their chairs. “Thank you for meeting with us, gentlemen. You’ve been a great help. Now

They were ushered out of the office. On the street Rube gave vent to any manner of words he hadn’t known he knew. Boggert listened with interest and corrected his pronunciation on two of them.

“Get in the car. I want to get back home.”

They didn’t talk much on the drive from San Luis, and Boggert dropped Rube off in front of his house with a quiet, “See you later,” before taking off to patrol his town.

Rube walked down the drive-

way to the house. He could hear Buddy whining while he was still yards away. The old dog didn’t like being shut up in the house by himself, but Rube had been told to come without canine companion.

“Damned bureaucrats,” Rube muttered, opening the door, stepping aside to avoid the exiting bundle of dog. “Just let me get your leash . . . oh, forget the leash. Come on, Buddy, let’s go for a walk. I want to think and work off this frustration.”

They ended up on the beach. While Buddy chased seagulls, Rube poked a stick in the sand. There were no surfers in the water and no lighthouse on the horizon, and any schooner that had been out there had sunk with all hands aboard. Cindy would have to write a new batch of songs.

A larger shadow passed over his stick scratchings, and Rube looked up to see the turkey buzzard land farther down the beach. Some dead thing must have washed ashore. Once again he marveled at the paradox of the bird: so graceful and beautiful in the air but close up on land an ugly, ungainly thing that fed only on carrion.

A lot like Sam Mitchem, Rube thought, and threw the stick away from him, only to have it brought back by Buddy.

“She doesn’t deserve a father

like Sam," Rube told the dog. "She didn't deserve a mother like Rose Marie for that matter. She should have a family, one with parents who will care for her and lots of other kids to play with, to treat her just like one of them, take her oddities as part of her personality and not try to change her. It couldn't be the Waltons; they were too perfect. She should have a family like . . ." and he tried to think of a family, scrolling through the ones he knew in New York and then the ones he'd met here in Cambria. Buddy came ambling back to him, sniffing at Rube's feet, wondering why he'd stood still for so long.

"My God," Rube said. "Buddy, do you know there is such a family, and right here in town? We went out there before we visited Rose Marie and met Cindy. The Anderses. Remember at the ranch, the ones with all the children?"

Buddy's tail wagged double-time as if he did remember the romp with the children: Greg and Theresa Anders's three, Greg's four others by previous marriages, the five belonging to Greg's brother who lived with them, and the four of a cousin who lived in town. There were always children there. And at least four generations living in that huge old ranch house. With lots of time for stories and play . . .

"One more wouldn't matter to them at all, they'd hardly notice her there, but it would make all the difference in the world to her, wouldn't it? But would they do it?" Rube turned back to the cliff. "Come on, Buddy, we've got to get back to the house. I want to take the car and go for a visit. Come on, boy, we've got a call to make."

"Hurray! It's Buddy and Rube!" was the greeting as they pulled onto the Anderses' ranch and parked the car. As before, hordes of children ushered them from the car to the house, and Rube felt a twinge of guilt when Greg's wife Theresa smiled at him.

"You're just in time for dinner, Rube. We eat early this time of year and turn in early. Please do stay, it will be a treat for the children."

There was no way he could refuse, and in no time he was reminded of how charming the Anderses were, how they made you feel at home, even with Grandpa Anders's gruffness. Rube cleared away two helpings of dinner and one of dessert and watched the children take the plates away to the kitchen before he was brought back to his purpose when Greg pushed his chair back from the table and eased his belt out a notch.

"So, what can we help you with, Rube? Last time you visited us it was after that horrible poisoning at the Halloween party. We heard about Rose Marie Mitchem and her little girl. Sad thing. What brings you this time?"

It was a perfect lead-in. Rube cleared his throat, and if he'd thought he'd pleaded with eloquence to the Child Welfare people, it was nothing to his recapping of all that had happened to Cindy since his last visit.

"She needs a home, and they won't let me provide it. I know it's a horrible imposition to ask, what with all the ones you have to take care of now; but I do have some extra put aside that I'd be happy to give to her upkeep if you could see your way clear to . . ." his words died away.

Geoffrey Anders and his wife looked at Greg and Theresa, then back to Rube. But Greg and Theresa barely locked eyes before she smiled.

"Of course we'll take her, Rube. And none of that about your helping out financially. A little thing like her will hardly make a dent compared to the others. We'll be happy to give Cindy a home."

He just sat there staring at them, at the smiles on their faces and the lack of strain or compulsion. "Just like that?"

Are you sure? I don't want to pressure you—"

"Not just like that, I'm afraid." Greg Anders said, and Rube's throat went dry. He known there'd be a catch. "There is one condition."

"What?" Rube said. "Anything."

Greg smiled. "You have to come to Thanksgiving dinner. We're having three turkeys and all the mashed potatoes and gravy a person can handle. That's the condition. Do you accept?"

Rube blinked. "You're kidding me; aren't you? You'll take Cindy in if I come for Thanksgiving dinner? That's it?"

"Well, Buddy, too." Theresa answered. "He can have a wing."

Buddy didn't say anything, but they could all hear his tail thumping double-time from under the table, where he'd positioned himself to catch tidbits from the children's plates.

"Do you like white meat or dark?" Theresa asked.

"Dark," Rube answered, thinking of Sam's calling Cindy his darkling darling. It was a phrase he couldn't get out of his head. "Are you sure that's all you want?"

"Well," Grandpa Anders stuck in, "I think you should do the honors of the wishbone, too, while you're at it."

Rube looked around the table at all the faces. Tried to think of the words to express the emotions he was feeling, but all he could think of to say was, "Okay."

*

When he and Cindy pulled on the wishbone at the end of dinner, he was pleased to see it broke off with the majority in her hand. For himself, he couldn't think of anything more to wish for.

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FICTION

THE SENDING

James S. Dorr

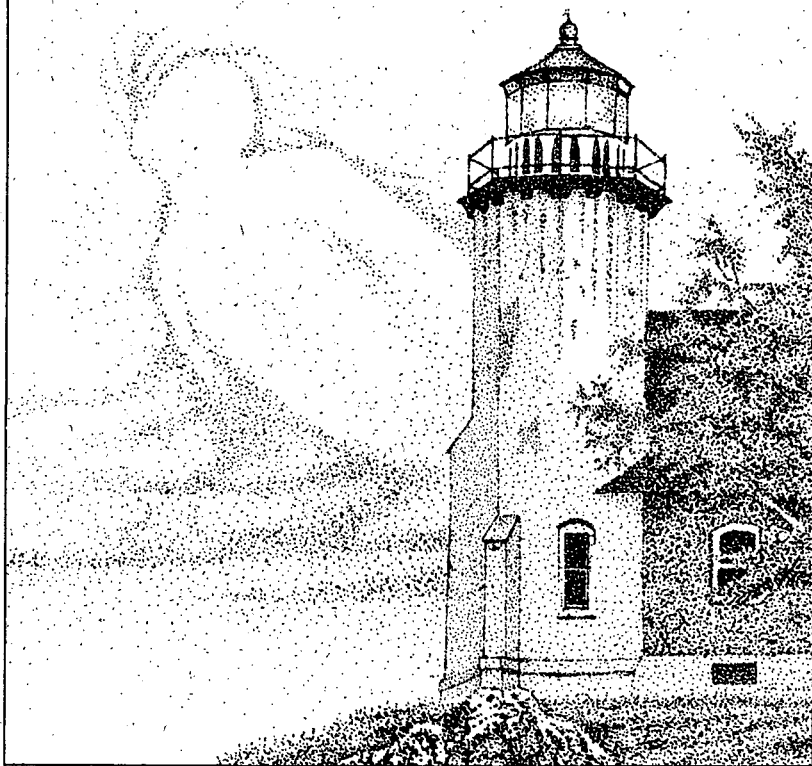


Illustration by David Monette

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 12/97

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"I want to marry a lighthouse keeper."

ERIKA EIGEN.

She came from the western part of the state, from the Teachers College at Tallahassee, sometimes hitching rides, mostly walking through swamp and scrub pine. She came to the coast where she had been born, to the sight of the now-abandoned lighthouse, its funding cut as her own school's had been, no longer able to finish her studies and so, as so many people were now, doing no more than wandering and looking for odd jobs. She came to the old Spanish fort, long in ruins, that she had played in during her girlhood—the mission graveyard where she used to sit in the moss and the cool damp thinking her thoughts until her aunt on her father's side, Zenobia Doll, would shake her head and cluck like a brood hen. "Child's got the gift," Auntie Zen would say, and her mother would cluck back, "Not my Tansy," and call her in to help with the supper or help chop kindling or help look for crabs on the beach beneath the crumbling fort walls or anything outdoors and out of the shadows.

Her mother was dead now, worked too hard since her father had left them, and the patch of ground they had labored to farm had long since been foreclosed on by the State Bank, itself closed up now, too. And Auntie Zen had moved off to Ocala and told people's fortunes by talking to spirits.

And President Hoover . . . well, President Hoover was sitting in his big Yankee house in Washington, D.C., Tansy reckoned, maybe beginning to think self-help wasn't *all* that was needed for the country's problems. She'd learned *that* in college. And maybe down coast, if she got to Palm Beach or perhaps Miami where some still had money in spite of the land busts, she might yet find work as a tutor or governess to some rich family.

But now . . . she looked long and hard at the sky. Wind was blowing, freshening from the east. She'd been just in her teens in '28, practically still just a girl two years prior to that, but she remembered. The clouds, shaped like fish scales, high and wispy, rocketing west and north over the ocean.

She gazed at the sky, then hitched her pack higher on her shoulders and turned from the road, heading seaward through palms and live oak to the fort's remains, where the walls were thick and, if she remembered right, the ancient Cuarteles del Comandante still had half its roof on. She didn't need "gifts" for this, knowing the weath-

er. Nor, having lived through the edges of two hurricanes before, did she need special senses to realize that even if the wind never reached the force of a full gale the ocean could still rise, crashing over the shoals off the coast with waves twelve feet high, or sixteen, or thirty, and walls made of stone made the soundest shelter.

The wind was freshening. She bowed her head to it as the trees thinned out, one hand on her hat's crown pressing it to her skull, and didn't see the man until she had practically run right up on him.

"Hold it there, missy," he said, whirling toward her. She gazed at his hand as it flew from his suitcoat—his *Yankee* suitcoat like people wore when they lived in the city. It held a revolver.

She gazed at his hand, wide-eyed, stammering. "I—I . . ."

"What are you doing here, missy?" he said. His eyes darted from side to side, then fixed back on her. "You from around this place?"

"I—I didn't do nothing," she finally got out. "Name's Tansy, not Missy. Tanace Doll. Got family around here—" the words rushed out now—"used to have, anyway. 'Fore the bad times . . ."

The man's face seemed to relax, and he smiled. "My name's Lewis," he said—he still kept the gun in his hand, though. "A girl like you shouldn't be out here alone, Tansy. Not on an afternoon like this one's turning out. Looks like it's fixing to storm some tonight, 'least that's what the boss says. Or if not tonight, in the next day or two. He's counting on it. But anyway you better come with me."

She nodded toward the fort, but he ignored her. "Got a place fixed up," he said. "This way, Tansy." He gestured with the gun to the lighthouse, its fading brick tower rising above the dunes two hundred yards down the beach.

Numbly she followed his directions, walking before him along the bay shore. They walked past the locked and boarded-up tower to the two story clapboard house that had been the lighthouse keeper's quarters. She waited while he knocked twice on a window.

"That you, Louie?" a voice called out.

He answered, "Yeah," and after a moment the door to a shed addition opened. "Had to break in through the back," he murmured, pointing for Tansy to go in first, only now putting his gun back into its shoulder holster. "Front door's *strong*—must have been built a hundred years ago, when they made things to last. Not like these days."

And the Spanish fort must be at least *four* hundred years old, Tansy thought, and will be standing when this house has turned to

dust, but she kept silent. She glanced once at the sky, noting that it had already darkened, then went inside to the building's kitchen as Lewis told her.

The storm didn't come that night nor the next day but hovered out to sea according to the short wave radio that had been set up in the front parlor. Aside from Lewis, Tansy counted four other men there: the one called "the Boss," another named Stephens, two others whose names she never quite heard said. She saw they had rifles stacked in one corner, black, ugly rifles like soldiers used during the Great War. And strangely, she thought, lanterns were arrayed in a row on the empty bookshelves—big, old fashioned lanterns—and kegs of lamp oil, maybe some of them going back to when the lighthouse was still in use.

She didn't have time to speculate, though. The boss made a gesture, and Lewis took her into the kitchen and set her to work boiling coffee and making sandwiches for the men's supper. He became sort of a protector for her, especially later when they took her back to the parlor and had her polish the lanterns' brass fittings and trim their wicks and she heard on the short wave that the storm had turned, heading first in the direction of Cuba but then just hovering, circling slowly, out past the Bahamas. Sucking up ocean. Building its strength.

After darkness and more confirmation that the storm wasn't moving—at least not that night—Lewis made her precede him upstairs and showed her into a small, snug bedroom beneath the eaves that faced the ocean. "The door has a lock," he said. "One on the inside as well as the outside. Not that it would stop a man from breaking the door down if he really wanted to, but it would make so much noise that the boss and me'd be able to stop him. Know what I mean, Tansy?"

Tansy nodded. She hadn't thought up to now that she might be in real physical danger, but now she was frightened. The men *were* Northerners by the way they talked, and scarcely gentlemen despite their fancy suitcoats and neckties. Not judging by the words they used even in front of a lady like Tansy.

She shivered, then nodded again and tried to smile. She knew all too well what Lewis's meaning was from the cheap magazines she and the other girls used to sneak into their rooms in college. With lurid covers of women being slapped, women being shot, having their clothes torn off. Halfway pushing Lewis out the door, she

locked it behind him, shivering again when she had done so. She looked at the room's single, narrow bed—lighthouse keepers were mostly unmarried men back in the old days, the thought came to her—and, after thinking about undressing, finally lay down with her clothes still on her.

She checked through her shirt pockets twice to be sure she still had her matches, a single box with a funeral home ad on its cover, then blew out the candle Lewis had left her and drifted into an uneasy slumber.

She woke in the darkness. She saw a shadow. She looked toward the window—the moon was just breaking through the cloud cover despite the storm—then back to where she had seen something moving.

She saw a man now, gazing down on her. A young, handsome man, not like the men down below with Lewis but one wearing some kind of Yankee sea uniform. She recognized it from pictures she'd seen when she was little of her father's grandfather, back before the War of the Secession, before he had left the enemy's service and ended aboard a Confederate ironclad. She recognized the way he wore his hair, blond and curly and with a mustache—not a beard like Great-grandfather Doll had worn in *his* pictures but a big handlebar like from before the war—and long blond sideburns and buttons all up and down his blue wool jacket.

"W—who are you?" she asked. Despite the fact that her voice still trembled, she knew for some reason that she wasn't frightened—some *sensing* she had that he meant no harm to her.

He took off his cap and bowed stiffly. "Lieutenant Erik Larsson, ma'am, of Bridgeport, Connecticut," he said.

She sat up in the bed. His voice was a Yankee's—a *New England* Yankee's—and yet was as soft and polite as a Southerner's. "Name's Tansy," she said. "Miss Tanace Doll, late of Tallahassee but raised up round these parts."

He bowed again. "At your service, Miss Tanace." He asked her permission and sat in the room's single, straight-backed chair. "I'm new here myself—just shipped in last Tuesday—but already I've grown to have a fondness for this land. You feel the sea's power, the way it crashes up over the shoal. My family's from Norway, my grandfather's family, and when I was little, I visited there once. The sea all around you. The storms in the winter. It has power, too."

"Never thought of it quite in those words myself, Mr. Larsson,"

Tansy said. "Leastways not till now. But there's a doozy of a storm brewing out there tonight, maybe come in to the coast tomorrow, or maybe the next night. You going to stay long here?"

The lieutenant nodded. "I am, Miss Tanace. This lighthouse, you see—I've been assigned to be her keeper."

She must have fainted. She didn't know. One moment she'd been reaching to her pocket to find a match to relight the candle, to better continue their conversation, and the next she had been lying alone in a gray morning light that coursed in through the window. Fainted, or dreaming—but it *wasn't* just a dream. That much she did know. Someday if she got back to Tallahassee she could look it up. Find out the names of the lighthouse keepers all up and down the coast, from the beginnings right up to the present year, 1931. But for now she knew, again somehow sensing it, that the first one who had served at this light had been named Erik Larsson.

She sat up suddenly. Also somehow she knew he hadn't served long. The lighthouse had been built a hundred years ago, maybe more than that, back before Florida even became a state, back when the coast had been wild and woolly. And one of the reasons the lights had been built was to discourage pirates.

She washed with the pitcher and basin she'd found in the room the night before and, when Lewis unlocked the outside catch, went downstairs to where the present-day pirates waited. She knew they were pirates now, something like pirates. That Erik Larsson's appearance was meant to be some kind of warning.

Once in the kitchen, after she'd washed the coffeepot out and started a new batch, she bided her time, like the storm at sea did from what she could hear from the next room's shortwave set. Later she got Lewis to take her outside to search for driftwood to fuel the stove in case what they had on hand wasn't sufficient. She was glad she had done so because by afternoon it was apparent that the storm was still waiting. Its time had not come yet.

One thing more she'd done. Stacking the driftwood she had in her arms, she'd sent Lewis back outside to fetch a few sticks she had dropped. She reached in a drawer as soon as he'd gone and took out a knife she'd seen next to the bread knife she'd used for the previous evening's sandwiches. Lifting her skirt, she tucked it into the roll of her knee sock, then got out the bread knife and was cutting bread when Lewis came back in.

She'd fixed the men lunch; then, making a pretext to go to her

room upstairs, she hid the knife underneath her mattress. They gave her her pack this time, having gone through it to make sure that all it contained was her clothing, and while she was upstairs, she changed into trousers, thick, heavy denims, boots and ankle socks, and a fresh flannel shirt, transferring her matches into its left pocket along with a pencil stub and a sheaf of notepaper. Maybe, she thought, she could write a warning, possibly toss it out a window if someone should come near the house on the beach. But even as she did so she realized that that was unlikely.

The storm winds brought rain with them that afternoon—brief, soaking showers as if it wished to keep even the hardiest beachcombers pinned in their houses—but still the storm's center remained well at sea. She made the men supper and winced as she heard Stephens whistle when she turned her back briefly on him. She prayed for the storm to come, to somehow end things before the other men became restless also. And yet, for one more night, it waited.

She slept in her clothes again, locked in her bedroom both inside and out, and once again dreamed of—*saw*—Erik Larsson. She would have dreamed of him in any event. She liked his politeness, his old fashioned manners. The way his eyes sparkled. She thought she was smitten—she *knew* that, too, somehow. On just one meeting! She, a sophisticate from the state college! But this time he came to her dripping with seawater.

"Erik!" she said. "I mean . . . Mr. Larsson." She reached for his hand and took it in hers, noticing for the first time the bracelet he wore on his right wrist. An old-style I.D. bracelet was what it looked like except that the letters were funny and scratchy.

He looked down with her. "It's Norwegian writing, Miss Tanace," he said. "Like the Viking sailors used back before they discovered real writing. My grandfather had it made up for me, and since then I've had it put on a new chain so it will still fit my wrist."

Tansy nodded. Viking letters. She'd learned about Vikings once in school—she had a way of remembering things like that—when she was little. About how they might have come to the north of America long ago, even before the Spanish had come, but hadn't stayed. But had brought their myths and legends with them.

Now, why had she thought that?

She shook her head, clearing it. "Erik," she said again, dropping pretense. "And you just call me Tansy, you hear?" She sensed some-

thing, that was why. Something evil that she hadn't thought of. She shook her head once more.

"Erik, just *look* at you!"

The lieutenant shook his head as well—and now she could see that he'd lost his cap. And his jacket was torn and his shoulder bloodied.

"Salvors, Miss . . . Tansy," he finally said. "Wreckers. They came to the lighthouse during a storm, and I let them in. The water was rising—I couldn't let them drown. But then they hit me . . ."

He shook his head again, and now she saw there was blood in his hair, too. Blood and seaweed.

"They knocked you unconscious?" she asked. "But the lighthouse . . . ?"

"They doused its flame. A ship was coming—a ship they expected. They took lanterns with them and went to the dunes, then walked up and down with them, making them bob up and down like a boat's lights in heavy seas but still safely offshore. They lured the ship in with them onto the reef. They tore out its bottom . . ."

"Erik," she said. "No! But what did they do to *you*?"

He squeezed her hand gently. "After they'd finished, they came back for me. They didn't want witnesses, you understand. People who might have seen their faces. They hit me again so I'd stay unconscious, then took me out to the spit and the fort and . . ."

"They *drowned* you, Erik?"

"They threw me in, yes. The eye of the storm had just passed by then, and the tide was receding. It pulled me out with it—a sailor's nightmare, to be lost at sea and not buried on dry land. Just like the others, those on the ship who were pulled to sea also, while meanwhile the ship's cargo, being of more bulk, remained in the shallows."

"No!" Tansy whispered. And this time she *did* faint. She woke in the morning to Lewis's knocking on the bedroom door, and now she remembered, from two nights before, something one of the men had said when they'd thought the storm was moving toward Cuba. Something about a ship at Havana laden with rum that would be trapped there until the storm veered north.

She put it together. And then would follow the storm when it came to the Florida coast, keeping the Coast Guard's cutters in port . . .

The knocking was louder. "*All right!*" she answered. "Just give me a moment to wash my face, you hear?"

And as with Erik, they wouldn't want witnesses.

Slowly she unlocked the bedroom door and followed Lewis down the stairs to where two of the men pored over a chart they'd spread out on the floor. "Our pigeon's flying," one of them said before they realized that she could hear them. "I make it about here—" he drew a mark on the chart with a pencil, then took a straight-edge and drew a connection to other marks that had been drawn before—"which brings it to *here* by early afternoon, the way the storm's tracking. Then . . ."

"Shut up!" said Stephens, suddenly seeing her. "Lewis, you get your bim out of here and into the kitchen, have her cook us up plenty of coffee. Boss's outside checking the storm, but from what we hear, it's going to work just fine. Get to us really hard just after dark."

"Yeah?" Lewis said, herding her into the kitchen ahead of him. "You heard what the man said, Tansy. Plenty of coffee. Be a long day, not that you didn't sleep through enough of it."

She nodded and took out one of her matches to relight the stove fire. Only five left, she thought, not that it mattered. "You're rum-runners, aren't you?" she whispered to Lewis. She glanced toward the window—the storm *was* freshening. "'Cept this time someone's beaten you to it. Gotten a cargo you wanted for yourselves . . ."

"That's enough, Tansy," Lewis snapped. "It's more than just rum, though it'll have that, too. Sort of a bonus. It . . ."

Suddenly they both heard a door slam, and moments later the one they called the boss came from the back shed into the kitchen. He glared at Tansy, then at Lewis, then at the pot that Tansy was filling from the pump over the kitchen sink. "You're on guard, Lewis," he said as he slouched past. "Tonight when we've gone out. Keep an eye on her—and anyone else who might try to come in out of the storm."

He stopped and looked again at Tansy. "That is," he said, "unless . . ."

Lewis shrugged. "She'll be okay," he said. When the boss had left, he turned to Tansy.

"You *will* be okay?" he asked.

Tansy nodded. She tried to smile. To make her voice casual. "What do I care?" she said. "I mean, what you're doing. Gangs of bootleggers fighting other gangs—it's none of my business. And all it means in the end is one or the other of you's still just cheating some damn Yankee revenue agent."

*

The thing was, she did care. Gangsters or not, the men on the ship were still human beings. And what of the sailors? Her Great-grandfather Doll had been a seaman. He had been lucky—the Yankees had captured him after the river battle at Vicksburg and let him go when the war was over. He'd died in his bed with his family around him and had been buried in the Methodist churchyard.

And what of Erik?

But what could she do in any event? When full dark came, the other men checked their rifles, took up their lanterns, and left the house. That left her and Lewis along with the shortwave still set to the Coast Guard emergency broadcast. It wasn't a hurricane, still not officially—not quite by inches—but dangerous enough to keep all shipping cleared. All honest shipping. And not only that, it had turned shoreward and, from its last measure, was heading straight toward them.

The house—it was sound, but not *that* sound. "We ought to batten the windows," Tansy said. "Close up the wooden shutters outside."

Lewis looked at her, then back at the big coffee mug in his hands. Except Tansy knew it didn't hold coffee, at least not purely. He'd taken to sneaking in shots from a flask, just as the others had to get their nerve up. But now he put it down.

"I got a better idea for us, Tansy," he said. "All alone like we are here."

She shook her head. "Lewis, no," she said. She backed away from him toward the stairs as he got up from the chair he was sitting in. "We got to be ready for the storm, honest."

Lewis chuckled, a mean, ugly chuckle. "Just you be ready, Tansy. What do you think I've been guarding you for, keeping you safe and sound from the others? You could be killed, you know."

She backed away faster, then turned and ran up the staircase and into her bedroom. She bolted the door, then dashed to the window. Too small to squeeze through—even if it wouldn't still be a two story drop to the hard sand below. She heard Lewis's fists start to beat on the door—the wood start to splinter—as pictures from pulp detective magazines raced through her head. Of women's clothes being torn off, and worse. Of shootings and knifings.

The knife!

She reached for the bed. Under the mattress. Trembling, she drew out the vegetable cutting knife she had smuggled up from the kitchen.

But it looked so small now.

But it was what she had. She hid it behind her as the door crashed open, then brought it out quickly. "You stop right there, Mr. Lewis," she shouted. "I—" what were the words they used in the magazines? "—I—I know how to use this!"

Lewis laughed. He took one stride toward her, then sidestepped abruptly and slapped her face. Hard. She felt blood welling into her mouth as he slapped her again, striking her wrist this time, sending the knife clattering onto the wood floor.

She backed, half staggering, into a corner, tasting the salt blood. Feeling his panting breath. Feeling his hands on her.

Hell with the magazines—she was a *wildcat*. A Florida girl, not some shrinking-heart damn Yankee woman! A Florida wildcat that spat and cursed at him. Spat her blood at him and scratched with her fingers, then—hell, she was wearing man's pants, wasn't she, not some heavy skirt that would confine her?—she brought her knee up, *hard*. As hard as his slap to her.

Groaning, Lewis collapsed to the floor, clutching his groin as she kicked his face, then shot through the door and slammed it behind her. Tears streaming, of anger and fear and, hell, she didn't know what, she groped her way down the stairs. Into the parlor.

"Miss Tansy, is something the matter?" a voice said. A soft New England voice.

Blinking her tears back, she looked up into the deep sea-gray eyes of Erik Larsson.

She told him. Sure. Not so much about Lewis as of the others. The salvors. The wreckers. The ship that was coming north with the storm. But what could they do?

And she knew the answer as soon as he said it. As soon as he brought out his solid brass door key.

"The lighthouse, Tansy."

She *sensed* the answer, and now they were climbing the cast-iron stairs of the seventy-three foot high lighthouse tower. The walls, she knew somehow, were five feet thick, of good Florida brickwork, and yet she could feel the entire structure sway as the first gale force winds of the storm blew in earnest.

They reached the top, the lantern gallery smelling of fish oil—the tanks, at least, had never been emptied—and once more she knew—*sensed*—the functions of the things around her, the bull's-eye lens of a third-order Fresnel that faced the sea, the twin Argand

burners in tandem behind it, the parabolic catoptric reflector that stood, still polished, to concentrate the fifteen hundred candlepower, eighteen mile fixed beam light still further. She didn't need to be told where the pump was, to help Erik pump oil up into the hollow wicks, or where the air blowers were to prime them. To *carburet* them, she thought with a giggle—the oil smell and swaying were making her dizzy—just like a car motor, to make a gas vapor until the heat of the flames could sustain it.

The sea crashed below them. They had to shout to make themselves heard, and even then the whistle of wind, increasingly stronger, the rattle of the outside iron catwalk, made shouting at best hit or miss.

They took to hand signals—a glass pane cracked, suddenly, letting a gust of air whirl around them as Erik pointed to the lantern wicks' pilot light touch hole. She struck a match to it, using the pack she still had in her shirt pocket, then gestured back—she had four matches left and the hole was clogged solid.

She pulled out another match, and Erik pointed, then started to pump more air through the wicks. Suddenly, momentarily, the wind fell silent, and far off they heard the sound of a ship's horn. "Coming into the storm's eye," she shouted. "Ship's captain must be sailing right with it, taking advantage of relative calm."

Erik nodded. "There's not much time, then." He pointed again. "You'll have to light the wicks directly."

Damn, she thought. She leaned to the wicks—she could scarcely reach them over their housing. Stretching, she struck her match. Just as the wind resumed.

Damn, she thought again, watching the match flicker out. Three matches left now, and she would need at least one for each wick. She reached in her pocket. Perhaps she had others? Her head was swimming—the oil and the swaying. She didn't watch out, she was going to be sick.

She pulled her hand out, with the pencil and paper she'd stuffed in the pocket the previous day. No more matches. But . . .

"Yes!" she shouted. "*Erik, more oil!*" She tried to "sense" to him if he couldn't hear her.

She saw him nod—*yes!*—as she rolled up the notepaper, leaning and dipping it into the oil spurt. She rolled it tighter, nodding as Erik went back to the air blowers, making a taper like rich ladies used to light fancy candelabrum candles.

She lit another match just as a heavy gust of wind struck them, shaking the tower. Making her drop it. *Two* matches left now.

She crouched this time, carefully, cupping her hand around the tip of the oil-soaked paper. She waited. She timed the sways of the tower.

She struck between gusts, drawing the match along the safety strip of its wooden pack, guarding it, bringing its spark to the tip of her paper. She held her breath as it suddenly flared. The paper was lit!

Still cupping her hand, she leaned past the housing to the nearer lamp wick and was nearly blown back by the heat blast. Quickly she swept her flame to the second, again nearly blown back. Nearly blinded by the reflector. And, still in her match pack, one whole match still unused!

"Erik!" she shouted. She took his hand as they looked out through the gallery windows, down first to the feeble lights that bobbed on the dunes below to the north, then out to sea along the beam light. They saw white water froth as waves struck on the shoal, jetting upward as much as fifty feet, then in the distance, just as the wind slackened to nearly nothing—the eye of the storm!—they saw a ship's searchlight turn suddenly on.

Other lights shot on—the ship was lit up now as sailors and passengers poured onto its deck to spot the danger. Passengers even—the ship was no rumrunner. It was a liner! Practically, anyway. Maybe with deportees, trying to sneak them back into the country, Tansy didn't know, but they were *people*, living and breathing. And what was important, the ship's horn blared again as its bow swung, slowly, back out to open sea.

She scarcely heard the shots from the shore now, other rifle shots from the ship answering. She scarcely cared even when one shore rifle turned on the tower, shattering another glass pane with its bullets.

She took Erik in her arms just as the eye passed, bringing the wind from a different direction. She kissed him hard, full on the lips.

He pushed her back from him. "Tansy," he said, "you shouldn't have done that."

Something was wrong.

"What?" she answered.

"Tansy," he said—the wind was increasing as she strained to listen, to keep her head clear of the fumes of the lantern—"don't you

understand? I was killed more than a hundred years ago, just a month after this tower was opened. My body was thrown in the sea forever."

She shook her head. "No, I *don't* understand. All I know is that you're here now. And we saved that ship, Erik. And now the gangsters are going to get us, but I don't care. As long as you're with me, I . . ."

"Tansy, no." He laid his finger across her lips. "There's a belief in my grandfather's country. Of creatures that the Vikings called Draugs—what others call Sendings. These are the souls of men drowned at sea whose bodies could never be laid to rest in hallowed ground. And so they wait there."

She shook her head, wanting to speak, but he kept his finger to her lips as he continued. "*You* sent for me, Tansy. Some people can do that. They have that power. As soon as you realized you might be in danger. And I was glad to come. But others, Tansy—and remember that they died unhallowed—will come of their own accord and can do evil."

She pushed away from him, shaking her head again. "*You're* not evil, Erik," she said. She shouted. She sensed to him. As the wind blew harder.

And then she knew, like the things of the lighthouse. "Yes, Tansy," he said. He held his finger up, showing the red stain. "It's blood that calls them. Blood that reminds them of when they were living. Your blood, Tansy. Your lip, when you kissed me—they got the taste of it as well. And all that can stop them . . ."

And Tansy realized—the *hallowed* dead. The Christian dead. The dead that had gotten a churchyard burial. They could be sent for, too, to push these other ones back in the ocean where, fair or not, it was meant they should stay. But . . .

"Erik, you're Christian. In your heart, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Yes. But I'm still unburied."

The burners behind them began to flicker, the oil that remained in their tank running low. She saw the flash of light shine on his bracelet. Then, in her mind's eye, she saw other things flashing—sensed other things flashing—swords and peaked helmets. Spear points and breastplates.

"*The Spanish!*" she shouted.

"Tansy, what?"

"Look, Spanish are Catholics, aren't they, Erik? And Catholics are practically the same as Christians. Out at the old Spanish fort

there's a graveyard. A *mission* churchyard. I used to play there when I was little—to talk to the spirits. At least to pretend to."

Erik nodded. "Then you've got to run as fast as you can, Tansy. Do more than just run. Push yourself out to them. Meanwhile I'll go to meet with the Draugs, to slow them up, maybe—to make sure they don't get farther than just the beach. Even if . . ."

Both he and Tansy looked down at the floor. "Even if . . ." she whispered.

And then she knew.

She was getting dizzy. Ill from the oil smell.

"Erik," she shouted—she made her voice rise above even the wind. "Don't you dare go back in the ocean yourself with those Draug-things! Those other Sendings. You hear me, Erik? Dammit, I . . ."

He was gone. Just like that. She ran to the gallery windows and saw, outside, shadows forming. Shadowy creatures out from the sea. She felt herself fainting—the fumes, the bad air. She ran to the window that had been shot through and leaned her head outside.

"Dammit, I love you!" she shouted, then turned back to the spiraling iron staircase.

She felt herself falling . . .

. . . her body below her. She saw her own body, dim, as if in a mist. Mist all around it. But now she was running, down the spiral stairs, out through the oak doorway onto the sand dunes. Around her she saw shadows, heard shots being fired. Heard wood splintering and then men screaming.

But she was running. Fast as the wind that swirled all about her, kicking up sand clouds.

The moss and the coolness on hot summer days.

And she heard more men shouting. Harsh, rasping shouts in words she at best only half understood. *Por Santiago! Gloria y España y Florida!* Saw metal glinting as if under hot sun, and smelled oil and men's sweat and even gunpowder.

And felt herself falling. Felt the storm crash in . . .

And woke to sunlight on the floor of the old Spanish Cuarteles del Comandante—the quarters of the fort commander. The roof was all missing now, not still half on the way she had remembered, and when she went outside and walked down the beach, she found that the lighthouse keeper's house had been smashed to flinders.

The tower still stood, though, its door off its hinges and gaping open. But down the beach, also, she saw something glinting.

She walked slowly to it and saw—a skeleton, lying at full length and facing to sea, but with streaks behind it gouged in the sand as if it were trying to hug to the dry land.

And on its wrist—its right wrist, she noted—she saw a bracelet like the I.D.'s some local soldiers had worn in the Great War, except it was scratched with funny letters.

She started to laugh. "Damn you, you Yankee, Erik!" she shouted—then suddenly stopped. "No, *don't* damn you," she whispered softly. She picked the bones up, cradling them in her arms, and carried them back to the Spanish fort, to the mission graveyard. She found a shovel near the lighthouse in what was left of the keeper's quarters and used it to bury Erik's bones there, in hallowed soil at last, making a cross out of driftwood she found washed up on the beach to place at his head.

Then she went on south, on foot and hitchhiking, until she got all the way out to Key West, where she set up a business like Auntie Zen's, telling people's fortunes by talking to spirits. Because Aunt Zenobia Doll had been right, she *did* have the gift, and she used it to do good, not to make money, although she did all right.

She never married. She went on Spiritualist lecture circuits from time to time, though, obtaining some fame as a featured speaker on the subject of out-of-body projections, and even returned once to Tallahassee. By then the lighthouse had been torn down, replaced by an automated beacon. But that didn't matter.

What did was that the legislature was mulling over a bill to make the old Spanish fort and grounds a Florida state historical monument. She saw its passage—and one thing more. She'd talked to one or two state senators—well, hell, she'd bribed them—to have a paragraph added to it. Down at the bottom, concerning the graveyard, and one grave in it with space for another, and with a cross made out of driftwood that someone kept replacing every year whether it needed replacing or not. She had something made up about her family having bought the land back before Statehood, back when deals of that sort were still made.

And she had it added that she would be buried there, too, when she died.

FICTION

THE WORD ON THE STREET

Robert Gray



*I have been in love, and in
debt, and in drink,
This many and many a year.*

Bart decapitated a stale pink
marshmallow Easter bunny and
washed it down with the dregs
of his lukewarm beer. He stared

at the words he had just scribbled
on a cocktail napkin. They
were first written by Alexander
Brome, seventeenth century,
long forgotten, poor bastard.
Bart wondered how many ob-
scure quotations were seeded in

the furrows of his brain after all these years on the job.

He was "lunching" in the midafternoon twilight of Letterman's Lounge. Earlier, he had mentioned that he had a sweet tooth, and Henry, the bartender, had scrounged until he discovered the rabbits.

They were out of season.

"What's the word, Bart?" asked Henry, who was polishing a glass and looking less than interested in a reply. "Another beer?"

Bart shook his head, popped the last of the bunny into his mouth. Henry's attention returned to the television set suspended from the wall—*Wheel of Fortune*, letters being turned with the focused precision of a Japanese tea ceremony by verbal high priestess Vanna. Word amateurs all over the room were shouting lame solutions to an obvious puzzle. Bart tried to ignore the TV; it hurt his eyes, hurt his ears, hurt his brain. He glanced at the screen anyway. Too many consonants on the big board. Buy a goddamn vowel, Sparky! The contestants were trying to solve a four word saying.

Quotations were Bart's specialty.

"'Nothing ventured, nothing gained!'" somebody screamed at the TV.

"No q in there, Einstein," muttered Bart.

"So what is it?" Henry challenged him.

Bart grinned, turned, headed for the door.

"You don't know," Henry prodded.

"I know."

"Fifty bucks says you don't."

"I'm off duty."

The office was quiet. Bart's lunch had stretched to two hours. His secretary, Synamon, looked up from her crossword puzzle, just a little irritated though less than usual.

"Eight letter word for 'incipient,'" she said.

"'Inchoate,'" he replied, picking up three pink message slips on the corner of her desk. "Anything good here?"

"Last one maybe. Eleven letters for 'eighteenth century Mad Max.'"

"'Robespierre.' Hold my calls."

Bart entered the gloomy atmosphere of his cluttered office. On the wall behind his desk was an old framed broadside promoting a collection of excerpts from Emerson's journals. Beneath a framed pen and ink sketch of the Sage of Concord were the words *I hate quotations. Tell me what you know.*

Words to live by unless you were in Bart's profession, but still a subtle reminder to keep things in perspective.

The room contained a mountain range of reference books. A thesaurus or two peeked out from beneath an avalanche of dictionaries. Several quotation books lay open and stacked upon one another; leaning against them were three immense world atlases. Biographical dictionaries, desk encyclopedias, word usage guides were scattered throughout a space that seemed more suited to a mad librarian than a private detective. For Bart, however, a room without open reference books scattered everywhere, always at hand, might as well have no oxygen.

The first two messages were from his bank. He thought of Emerson again (*If I were richer, I should lead a better life than I do . . .*) as he tossed them in the wastebasket. The third message was more intriguing. Libby wanted to see him.

Ah, Libby . . .

There had been something special between them once, briefly; something undefined yet exquisite. Now they were "friends" in the broadest sense of the term. They did not hate each other, but they rarely spoke. In fact, Libby had called him only once since their breakup.

This had occurred months ago. She was being harassed at the library by a pushy doctoral candidate who was pressing her

to help him find the etymology of a particularly evasive word attributed to a minor third century theologian. The doc-to-be's theory was that it had come into the language forty years earlier than generally acknowledged. A high-stakes research grant hung in the balance, and Libby, despite her best efforts, had hit a wall in her research.

He was becoming abusive by the time she contacted Bart. Although quotations were Bart's principal line of business, he seldom turned down a job in which words of any kind were involved. He had the contacts.

With a little help from his friends he found the key word, used in an obscure passage that confirmed the jerk's initial theory. Bart gave it to Libby and was suitably rewarded with money discreetly garnered from state coffers.

Libby then said thank you so very much and he hadn't heard from her since.

Until now.

The library was a temple—marble columns, marble stairs, marble floors—and a labyrinth of towering oak bookcases. Libby, who ran the information desk, ruled her domain from an elevated marble sacrificial altar at the center of the cavernous main room. A trio of immense crystal chandeliers hung down

like elegant stalactites above her head.

She was an unparalleled source of intelligence and guidance in the stacks but sometimes lacked the persistence and dirty fingernails required to dig deep into those sooty corners of human knowledge. That was where Bart came in, though he was inevitably surprised and flattered whenever his own seedy presence and primitive abilities were required by the intellectual elite.

As he approached the altar, he wondered why he continued to beat himself over the head for this tweedy, prim, bespectacled little woman whose back was now turned to him, a telephone wedged between her ear and shoulder. The moment he heard her voice, however, he remembered. Libby's mind was keen, unabridged. She spoke with a crisp British accent that caressed every vowel and consonant. Her lips, her mouth, her throat, her tongue all conspired to make speech an erotic instrument. Bart was certain that those "marital aids" catalogues could sell audiotapes of Libby saying anything, even the ordinary words he overheard as he neared the desk: "peculiar," "esoteric," "perhaps," "satisfaction," "ultimately."

His heart rate increased by twenty percent; his mind turned

to alphabet soup. She sensed his presence, turned, nodded, then whispered a terse dismissal into the receiver and placed it gently in its cradle.

"Hello, Bart," she said in the same whisper, hesitant but smiling. An intelligent woman, she knew what she was doing to him. Kept her words to a minimum, her voice in monotone.

Bart nodded, returned the smile. She motioned for him to join her on the island, and they sat facing one another. The silence that ensued lasted just a bit longer than he would have preferred before she broke it.

"How are you, Bart?"

"No pain, no visible scars. You?"

"Adequate . . . similar, I suppose."

Bart adjusted his position in the chair, leaned forward. "I assume I wasn't invited for tea and sympathy, love."

She nodded, drew in a deep breath, released it as a sigh. "I do need your help. I'm afraid it's more than just a word this time, Bart. That's why I called you. It's a quotation."

She picked up something from the desk, an index card, and handed it to him tentatively.

He read the passage that was typed on the card: *It's all a tragic blunder of blind fate.* He looked up at her. "Twentieth century . . . American?"

She shrugged, nodded slightly. "I'd say, though I'm not even convinced about the American part. The cynicism seems to fit, though there's also a hopelessness that seems not at all American," she said, perturbed by imperfection, incompleteness, inadequacy.

"Who's looking for it?"

She glanced away.

"Libby?"

"I can't say, Bart. They're willing to pay very well for results, however."

She picked up an envelope from her desk and handed it to him. Again, the peculiar, awkward exchange between them. Bart opened the envelope, fanned a few crisp new hundred dollar bills, Ben Franklin looking like some portly, weak-willed European monarch on the redesigned, hideous currency.

"Half of your fee is there. They will pay the balance upon receipt of the attribution."

"They?" he asked. "He? She? ... It?"

"They. I really can't tell you any more than that," she said, avoiding his eyes.

"This isn't just a job, is it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It's more personal, Bart."

That could have been a clue. Despite their time together, however, he knew virtually nothing of her life B.B.—before Bart. He tucked the index card

in his jacket pocket. Libby was looking more and more uncomfortable now that they were in business together again. Finally she exhaled and smiled weakly. "Thank you, Bart. I know it's asking a lot after our, what's the word? . . . denouement."

Bart waved her off. "Don't waste a big word like that on me, Libby. Save it for a real sentence."

He really didn't expect to find anything by retracing Libby's steps, but he spent the afternoon in his office anyway, poring through reference books.

His research fulfilled his modest expectations.

Nothing.

These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.

Bart thought the line from Hamlet was a good description of Street Scrabble, a fierce game when played the right way by the best players. One-on-one action, the tiles hitting the board like hailstones—double points, triple—the words short but powerful: "cash," "shoot," "bash," "whack," "pound"; nobody waiting for multisyllables; the players at each other every minute of the brief, violent games in which every move was punctuated by an insult, a jibe, a boast. Word challenges were rare,

sometimes deadly, always settled without a dictionary.

When Bart needed to know the word on the street, Lincoln Park was where he went. This was the original Scrabble Pit, a cluster of cement picnic tables where, two boards and four men to a table, the games ended only with darkness.

What did they play for?

Definition, man.

Bart hung out for awhile, watching a couple of kids going at it. They had the intensity down cold. Kids always got that part first. These two were green, though, holding letters too long, getting caught with *x*'s and *q*'s, unwilling yet to shed the hope of killer multisyllables.

They would learn.

Trip edged up beside Bart. In his prime Trip had been the exception to the rule here. Double and especially triple syllable words made him king, gave him his nickname, but the stress had turned him old and put him off the boards early.

Couldn't stay away from the park, though. And Trip knew that if Bart was here, cash might be in the air.

"What up, Bartman?" he mumbled, talking to Bart but not looking at him. Not ever. Eyes on the boards.

"Working."

"Thought so."

"Need your help."

"Thought so."

Bart told him what he knew, slipped him some cash. Trip responded with a passive, distant gaze, then snorted when the game the kids were playing stopped dead for a full ten seconds before one of them made a move.

Unforgivable. Trip shook his head in disgust.

Delegate. Delegate. Delegate.

The key to successful management.

Bart sipped his beer and stared at the TV—*Jeopardy!* Libby's quote was now in his mind constantly. It had acquired what Bart called *the ring*, as in familiar ring, et cetera. Sometimes he knew a quotation source was locked in his brain and waiting only for the necessary trigger to bring it back. This time the ring was getting stronger with every passing hour. He knew for certain that he had seen this sentence somewhere before Libby handed him the index card.

Letterman's was jammed with seedy, drunken pseudo-intellectuals, the logical result of a nearby university multiplied by rampant, viral tenure. They substituted alcohol and *Jeopardy!* for intellectual stimulation. Bart understood the strategy.

"What's Tolstoy?" yelled one of them at the TV screen.

"No, you idiot. Ibsen. I mean, 'What's an Ibsen or . . .'"

"Turgenev! Of course! I knew that!"

"Right. You and Alex Trebek."

"I did!"

Booze brain drain, thought Bart as he finished his beer. The phone rang, and after answering, Henry pointed at Bart and brought over the portable.

"Yeah?" Bart said into the receiver.

"Everything's polysyllabic, my man. Poly plus."

"Trip, you got something for me?"

"A little, maybe. Had my ear to the rails, man. You know what, Bartman? We're getting old? When that happen anyway?"

"The point, Trip?"

"I don't talk to kids as a rule; can't stand the little bastards. But I asked around and found out real quick that quote of yours ain't nothing special. Everybody's saying it, but they couldn't or wouldn't tell me much about it. Fact is, they don't talk much, these kids. It's like caveman times, man. They grunt, nod, got them baseball caps turned backwards. I heard when you turn a cap around like that it lowers your IQ seventeen points. Could be more. Know what I think, man?"

"No, what?"

"They don't wanna tell gramps their secrets. That's all it is. And probably it's TV; it's junk food; it's . . . you see the way they walk, these kids? Like zombies, all slack-jawed, hunched over. Dawn of the living deadbeats, man. They got nothing to say to me or you or anybody."

"This is news, Trip?"

"No, man. News is this. Forget the TV and the junk food line. I'm guessing the direction is music, man—they music videos. These kids don't know nothin' about nothin' that ain't got a beat. You got any connections there? It ain't my game, man."

"Could be. Thanks, Trip. Adios."

Bart handed the phone back to the bartender. The Double Jeopardy category was "Quotations," and when the contestant bet a thousand dollars, the crowd hushed and all eyes looked for Bart.

The stool was empty.

How often misused words generate misleading thoughts.

He drove up to see Web at the State Pen, the line from Herbert Spencer interfering with his concentration on the mystery quote. Web was a former city library custodian whose penchant for building a home collection of valuable dictionaries at the city's expense had been only the

first small step in a long slide downhill to his current position serving a long sentence as chief librarian at Greater Hudson Correctional Facility.

What had finally landed him in the big house was a major league case of homicidal plagiarism. Web knew this guy who had written a brilliant first novel. They had once been good friends in school. Web decided he wanted to be a famous author, so he took the logical next step. He killed the guy, stole the manuscript, and started shopping it around aggressively. A small subsidy press eventually published three thousand copies, and it soon was unsold and out of print.

But the dead author's family, a persistent bunch, hired a private detective, and all the sordid details came to light after a while. It took a jury only an hour to convict. The story made the national news wires. A major publishing house acquired the rights—one hundred thousand-copy first printing, six weeks on the *Times* bestseller list, all royalties to a newly concocted "foundation" established by the victim's family.

Web still talked about suing for a piece of that action.

Another story.

Despite his shady past, Web was a very useful associate in Bart's line of work, especially

with cases requiring his peculiar talent for definition and clarity. He worked cheap, too. He just loved the word game.

One more thing, of equal importance. Web was the only person Bart knew who watched television indiscriminately and for hours at a time.

Prison could do that to some people.

The two men sat across from one another at a long, wide steel table in the visiting room. The guard nearby looked suitably bored. He had seen Web and Bart together many times before. In addition, Bart had slipped the guard five cartons of Camel Lights when he first arrived at the prison, downstairs, before he was searched. This bought the two men a little extra time, and a carton would eventually find its way to Web's cell tonight.

Trickle-down economics.

Bart and Web didn't dwell on social niceties. Despite the difference in their circumstances, their basic daily lifestyles weren't dissimilar. They thought of little besides words and what words could do for them and to them. Words were their obsession, profession, strength, weakness, reason for living, and, in Web's case at least, reason for killing.

That said, Web was, ironically, a man of few words. He chose

nine: "What the hell do you want this time, man?"

Bart recited the quote from memory. Web listened with fierce concentration, then said, "What's the big deal?"

"You know this?"

"Maybe. Don't know what it means, though."

"Well? Tell me what you know."

Web snickered, stared at him like he was an idiot. "Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"You do."

Web nodded. "There's a rock band called Tragic Blunder—cutting-edge, monosyllabic, mumbling all the time that the world is dying and nothing matters, might as well get stoned and hang out. You know, that kind of crap. What do you need it for?"

Bart gave him the short version.

Web shook his head. "Now that you mention it, that sentence seems almost too formal for these knuckleheads, doesn't it? Literary even."

"Yeah," said Bart thoughtfully. "British?"

"Band's American."

"Maybe they're not what they seem."

Web eyed him suspiciously, then grinned. "Who is, my friend? Who is?"

Bart sat at his desk, a large

Styrofoam cup in hand. He had been drinking coffee all night, running across the street to the minimart every hour or so for refueling. He had been certain that immersing himself again in his books would do the trick. He could almost taste the attribution as he pawed through reference works, novels, biographies, journal and letter collections, shelves full of books of all description. Had he ever in his life tossed out a book after reading it?

In the end, lack of sleep had done the trick—left his conscious mind defenseless, which added to his intelligence exponentially. He'd stopped trying to weave something out of the slender threads given to him by Trip and Web. Those had helped him get started, narrowed the field a bit, but knew he would have to dig deep himself.

Finally, as early sunlight began to irritate his sensitive, nocturnal eyes, he found the key. Now he held the book in his hands, flipping through its pages casually. He had practically memorized this novel when he was young. He still had a 1944 edition he had found in a used bookshop after he quit college in 1971 and headed, very briefly as it turned out, "back to the land" on a shortlived commune in Vermont. The book's yellowed, frail pages were un-

derlined, dogeared and intensely well read in the very best sense of the term.

He had even underlined the relevant passage back then:

Wouldn't it be better to follow the beaten track and let what's coming to you come? And then you think of a fellow who an hour before was full of life and fun, and he's lying dead; it's all so cruel and so meaningless. It's hard not to ask yourself, what life is all about and whether there's any sense to it or whether it's all a tragic blunder of blind fate.

No wonder it had sounded so familiar to him. He grinned at the irony of it all. This cutting-edge rock band had apparently chosen for its name and mantra a quote from a novel that was so very, very dated and so very, very British—Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*.

He closed the book and called Libby.

They met in a neutral corner, the Kolumbian Koffee Kartel Shoppe on Sixteenth Street. Bart was early, so he ordered a large coffee, black. The girl behind the counter paused noticeably, waiting for further instructions before turning away. She was used to more complex requests—double double skinny decaf cappuccino, that sort

of thing—and Bart had stunned her with his simple-mindedness.

The place was crowded with suits because it was lunch hour in the business district. Numbers people. He didn't like numbers people much—too calculating. A table opened, and Bart moved in quickly, frightening off a scavenging trio of CPA's with a menacing glance.

He started thinking about Libby. Always a dangerous branch for him to roost on for any length of time. He tried to distract himself by stewing on the word "shoppe" for a while. He hated "shoppe" and "junque" and all those frivolous concoctions doing the work of perfectly serviceable, living and breathing words that just lacked the dubious cute/quaint factor. Like pouring chocolate sauce on steak. Here that damned word "shoppe" appeared everywhere he looked—signs, napkins, menus, mugs, probably the damned coffee beans themselves. Coffee Beanes, maybe they should be . . . he set the book down on the table.

Booke?

Libby was moving the chair across from him and sitting down, coffee in hand, before he even knew she was in the room.

"Good morning," she said, her tone subdued.

"Hi."

He thought that getting right down to business was the only way to save time, pride, and emotional stability. "I might have something," he said, nodding at the book lying between them. It had no dust jacket, and the black cover, weathered and abused, betrayed neither title nor author.

She reached for it, opened it to the page that was marked with a bill from the electric company threatening shut-off unless payment was sent forthwith.

Libby glanced at the bill, shook her head and smiled, then tossed it on the table. She read the highlighted passage. He watched her face as it altered from interest to dawning recognition, to, with the final words, a subtle hint of bemused malevolence.

"Unbelievable," she said, still smiling but standing up quickly, fumbling for her coat. "Nicely done, Bart; better than I could possibly have hoped for. I must go."

She apologized for leaving so suddenly. Asked him to meet her at Letterman's in two days.

What's past is prologue.

Bart contemplated William Shakespeare and observed Vanna again—letters turning; wheel spinning; three words, the category "Thing"; the answer so obvi-

ous that the Letterman patrons disdained to answer. Someone threw a balled-up napkin at the screen.

Bart and Libby were sitting in a dim, secluded booth, their faces flickering in candlelight. She looked calmer now, he thought.

The worst was over, she said, opening the conversation.

"Worst of what?" he asked.

She smiled and admitted that he more than deserved a full explanation. She could talk about it now. The quotation she had given him was a last chance, a final straw, a desperate gasp for air from a drowning victim.

"What?"

She said she would try to be brief and clear. She would tell him a story about words—how they can be lost and how they can be found again. Her boyfriend, Peter-Mark, had been possessed. She said this without a hint of irony or self-consciousness.

Bart heard the word boyfriend and almost missed the rest of it. Boyfriend? What kind of name is Peter-Mark? He hated the guy. Hated his pretentious parents as well.

She continued. He was ten years younger than she; a grad student who'd spent a lot of time at the library until nature took its course, et cetera, about six months ago.

Four months after our demise, he calculated involuntarily.

Peter-Mark was brilliant, immensely talented, had a marvelous education and could do anything he wanted to, she said. She hoped he would decide to teach. He had the gift.

Bart resisted the temptation to ask her about his looks. He didn't need that. He wondered now if he really "deserved" this explanation after all.

But she was just warming up. She explained that two months after they began dating he changed. He started watching television for hours at a time and complained that she didn't get the superiority of video technology. He listened to monosyllabic, pounding, rhythmic yowling and said she didn't get contemporary music. He stopped reading because words were archaic as soon as they were published and he wanted to "push the envelope" and "live on the edge." He and his friends grunted at one another like Neanderthals, and he said that she didn't *get* street lingo.

He was right. She didn't *get* any of it.

When he started disappearing for days at a time following a band called Tragic Blunder on its perennial concert tour, she decided that she had to rescue him from his descent into mute stupidity.

She located and hired a literary deprogrammer named Lex O'Connor. Peter-Mark was lured to a motel room and locked in, and the strange, frustrating process of verbal exorcism began.

She said that Peter-Mark had surrendered quickly and utterly to the premillennial "philosophy" touted by Tragic Blunder and their deluded followers. *Today Is the Past* was the title of their first album. *Nothing Ever Happened Ever* was the name of their second, most recent, effort. Peter-Mark shielded himself from Lex's efforts by repeating the mantra "a tragic blunder of blind fate" over and over in a monotone voice, his eyes glazed in a vacant stare.

Tragic Blunder followers did not believe in history, family, or anything else to do with anything that had happened before this moment . . . RIGHT NOW!

NO . . . NOW!

What had eventually compelled Libby to scribble those words on a slip of paper and hand them to Bart was nothing more than a desperate hunch he might be able to unlock the mysterious power that they seemed to hold. It had worked.

Somerset Maugham, of all people.

When Libby handed the battered edition of *The Razor's Edge* to Lex and he read the

passage, he knew he had what he needed. The following day he walked into the room as he had every other morning; opened his briefcase, and removed the book along with a framed, hazy, black and white photo of the author. Maugham looked suitably old, tweedy, paunchy, wizened, over-educated, and, worst of all, like a striking emblem of the distant past.

Positively historical.

At first Peter-Mark glanced disdainfully at the photograph; eyed Lex suspiciously as he opened the book to the marked page; listened with a bored expression to the lame passage that was read until he heard those magic words.

Lex stopped reading and handed the book to Peter-Mark, who snatched it away and re-read the passage again and again. There were no dramatic, primal howls, no flinging of chairs and lamps, no trembling and gnashing of teeth. It was simple. Peter-Mark had gone far away, and now, just as suddenly, he came back to her.

All because of the right words.

Then Bart was alone in the booth. Libby had been suitably

grateful for his help, but Peter-Mark was waiting for her. They were going to read Maugham to each other tonight to celebrate. Sounded like a hot time. Bart envied him, though he also sensed that a spell had finally been broken and the emergence of a "New Bart" was imminent.

Scary thought.

Somebody called his name, and Bart looked up. The bartender was pointing at the TV screen, where a six word puzzle had just been unveiled, not a single letter turned yet—virgin territory.

The category was "phrase." Bart concentrated on the screen, let his mind go blank for a moment, then focused on the puzzle.

"The business of America is business," he called out.

"How much?" asked Henry, who should have known better.

"Fifty bucks," said Bart. "Deduct it from my tab."

Ten minutes and two commercial breaks later, his solution was confirmed, but he was long gone.

Where?

The bartender said Bart had mentioned finding a new library and looking someone up.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

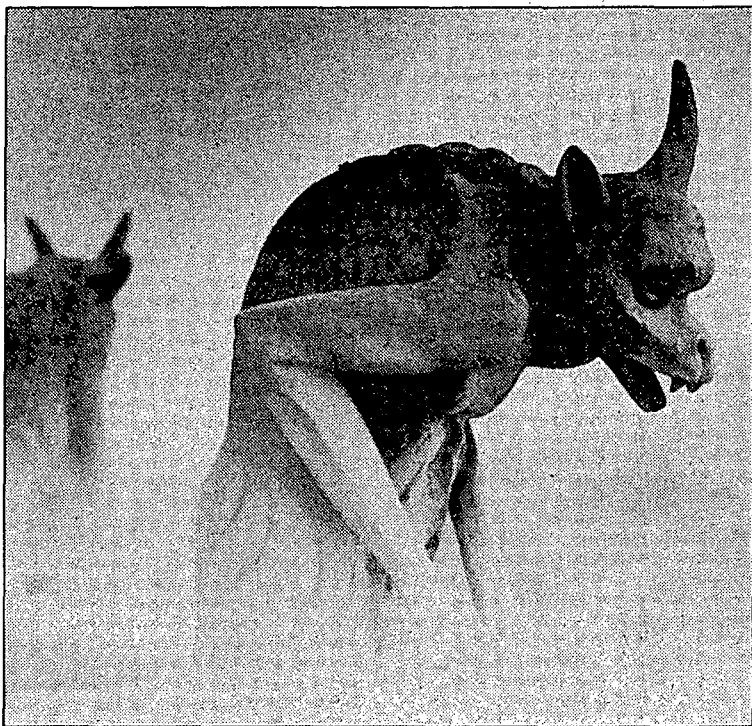


Photo by Rolan Fajardo

That's Frère Jacques all right. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

The Phantom of Johnnycake Lock

Dick Stodghill

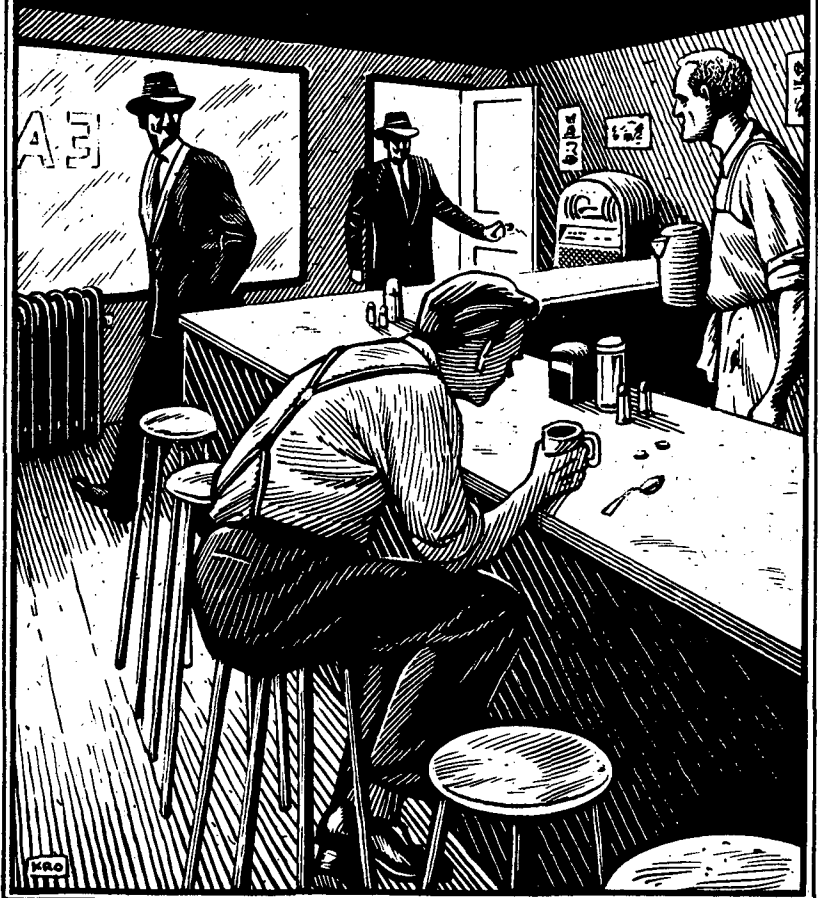


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 12/97

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was a bittersweet melody, haunting in its simplicity. A song of the times, melancholy, reflective, introspective. A hush fell when it began playing. Conversations trailed off, memories of old loves blurred by the passing years grew sharp and clear again.

When Jimmy Medlin heard it for the first time it was fresh and new, a popular hit of the day. Even young listeners who preferred the upbeat bands, scorned the mushy offerings of Lombardo and Jan Garber, fell under the spell of the latest release by Wayne King and His Orchestra. At the ballrooms and pavilions dancers clung tightly to their partners, lost for a while in a tranquil, secure world quite unlike the one awaiting them outside. And Jimmy Medlin would never forget that "The Waltz You Saved for Me" was playing the night he finally worked up the courage to pop the big question and Audrey Blaine said yes.

There was no other girl quite like her, Jimmy was certain of that. None quite so pretty, so pleasant, so much fun in a loving, subdued way. He couldn't think of a single thing about her that he would change, and now that he had found her he couldn't imagine life without Audrey Blaine.

What a difference six months had made. He had been jobless,

without prospects, alone and frightened. In common with so many young people in that grim, hopeless year of 1931, Jimmy Medlin was embroiled in a daily struggle just to survive, a battle that pushed all thoughts of the future aside. But now he had accomplished the next to impossible, found a decent job, and found the one girl meant for him. Another popular song of the time seemed to play continually in his mind: "It's the Girl." Yes, that was what made his life worthwhile, *The Girl*.

I couldn't recall the names of those involved, but for nearly seven years the incident remained tucked away in some remote corner of my mind. A freak accident they called it at the time. The deer had leaped aside a split second before the hunter fired; the bullet somehow passed unhindered through several hundred yards of trees before striking the driver of a car on Riverview Road. A one-in-a-million happenstance, the sort of thing the best marksman in the world couldn't have accomplished deliberately had he fired a thousand rounds in the attempt.

The hunter hadn't come forward, later claiming he had been unaware of the deadly result of his shot. A persistent sheriff's deputy familiar with

the area and its people eventually tracked him down. No charges were filed—what would have been the use?—but knowing the man's identity marked the case closed and put minds at rest.

All but one mind. The day the hunter's name appeared in the newspapers he had been viciously assaulted by the victim's fiancé. Had others present not restrained him it would have been murder. The assailant was arrested but never went to trial. Instead he was shipped off to Lima, committed to the state hospital for the criminally insane.

The events of seven years earlier came back to me only because the shooting had taken place not far from the spot where the dismembered body of a young man had been found. After pulling the old file from the *Times-Press* morgue and refreshing my memory, I did a sidebar on the all-but-forgotten case. It added spice, a touch of color, to my story of the mystery surrounding the body at Lock 27 on the long-abandoned Ohio and Erie Canal.

The gruesome killing resulted in some wild speculation in the Akron area. Many felt Cleveland's serial killer, the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run, had shifted his sphere of operation twenty miles south to the remote Cuyahoga Valley. The po-

lice and medics knew better. The murders in Cleveland were the work of skilled hands. The copycat was a rank amateur with a hacksaw, not a doctor, veterinarian, or butcher. Reporters covering the police beat, and I was one of them, could write that particular truth until doomsday, but a large segment of the population would remain unconvinced.

Only those who lived in northeast Ohio during the late years of the Great Depression could ever appreciate the fear inspired by the Mad Butcher. It was irrational, as most of us were well aware. The killer who periodically deposited cut up bodies along the railroad tracks running through a desolate industrial area near downtown Cleveland picked his victims with great care. Most were derelicts or transients who frequented the rough, often dangerous saloons in the nearby Third Police Precinct, the "Roaring Third." When they vanished, no one missed them, no one cared. With one or two exceptions they would remain forever unidentified.

Yes, we all knew that. Still the sound of footsteps in the dark of night banished reason from even the most pragmatic mind. And imaginative kids—all it took to send them flying for home was a glimpse of a

stranger dressed in black and carrying a satchel that might contain a large knife.

I returned to the boarding-house on Dudley Street after a late evening walk, shook the March drizzle from my coat, and climbed the stairs to the second floor, ready to climb into bed. Then on impulse I knocked on the door across from mine, the door of Jack Eddy's room. He snarled something that I took for an invitation. The assistant manager of the Akron branch of Wellington's National Detective Agency was stretched out on his bed but still dressed for the street.

I said, "How about a quick beer down at the Lenox?"

For a moment he lay scowling at me, then swung his legs to the floor. "Okay, why not?"

Those were the last words he uttered until we had spent five minutes on stools at the East Market Street bar a block from home. He wouldn't have spoken then if I hadn't said, "What's eating you, anyway?"

"What're you talking about?"

"You've been out of sorts for three days, that's what."

"Keeping count, are you?"

"How could I avoid it? So what's up?"

He polished off a half-full bottle of Burkhardt beer at a single gulp, signaled for another, and

then gave a shrug of resignation. "If it'll get you off my back, I can't locate a guy named Garland Skeen who came to town six weeks ago from Sandusky, then dropped out of sight. His mother's in a real tizzy, calls the agency every few hours. A thirty-one-year-old man and she acts like he's a baby. Anyway, Cal Andrus spent three days trying to run him down, then I took over myself."

"And struck out, right?" Even knowing it was a mistake, I couldn't keep a smirk off my face. "Mighty Casey advances to the bat and goes down swinging on three pitches. Cal Andrus must be laughing up his sleeve."

He turned on me. "Think it's funny, do you? For two cents I'd—" He cut it off short and stalked out the door, leaving me to wonder just what it was he'd do for two cents. I had a pretty good idea, of course, so I lingered at the Lenox until he had time to get home and into bed. Needling a man like Jack Eddy was foolhardy even when he was in a good mood. When he wasn't, baiting a coiled rattlesnake would have been less risky.

The second body was discovered early the next morning at the village of Everett close by the crumbling lock on the old canal. The first had been found just to the south at a place

where the canal had once crossed Furnace Run on an aqueduct.

As was true of many of the forty-two locks that lowered the canal about four hundred feet between Akron and Cleveland, Lock 27 was better known by its nickname, Johnnycake Lock. Some of the names merely pinpointed a location; others told, or hinted at, a story. When a washout stranded a boat at Lock 27 for several days, the passengers had had nothing to eat but the form of cornbread known as johnnycake. For the same reason the next one south was Pancake Lock, and a little beyond it was the Mudcatcher. Lonesome Lock nestled beside a desolate swamp, while a nearby distillery made Whiskey Lock a popular layover point.

Brawls over right of way were commonplace at the locks, so when a young muleskinner named Jim Garfield was on the losing side in one and ended up in the murky water, they didn't name the lock for him. They might have, had anyone realized he would go on to be president of the United States.

Why the killer picked Johnnycake Lock as a dumping ground was a mystery. It was visible from several houses in the quiet village of Everett. The aqueduct that had carried the canal over Furnace Run had long since dis-

appeared, so approaching from the south on what remained of the towpath was next to impossible. At certain other locks the killer's gruesome work might have gone undiscovered for quite some time, but perhaps he didn't want it that way.

Finding the bodies hardly inspired an appetite for johnnycake or anything else. There is no point in going into detail, but in each case they found a little bit here, a little bit there. The latest—the one Jack Eddy and many others assumed was his quarry—was missing a vital clue to his identity, a head. Garland Skeen had never been fingerprinted and had no distinguishing marks or scars, but the reassembled body was about the right age and size. It seemed reasonable to believe that Jack could close his file.

It was the loose, uninformed talk about the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run that led me into trouble. At twenty-four I was young enough and naive enough to believe the copycat killer deserved a name of his own. A police reporter with competition from two other newspapers needs to be creative now and then, but life would have been simpler had I just written a routine story. Instead, my lead read, "The Phantom of Johnnycake Lock struck again Tuesday night. An Everett man walking

his dog Wednesday morning discovered the dismembered body of a white male at Lock 27 on the old Ohio and Erie Canal. In February the body of Pat Monahan, an itinerant recently arrived in the Akron area, was found in similar condition a short distance south of the lock."

Actually it was the dog that made the discovery. When I first wrote it that way, *Times-Press* city editor Ben Goldsmith belated, "Come on, Geary, try using your head for something besides a hat rack. Let's keep good taste in mind." His unfortunate choice of words set up a howl in the newsroom.

But Goldsmith loved the "Phantom" touch. It gave us an edge, he believed, over the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the *Akron Beacon Journal*, our rivals in the circulation wars.

It certainly attracted attention. More than that, it aroused the ire of the entire community. I was castigated for being a scaremonger by three mayors, two chiefs of police, the sheriff, and more preachers than Summit County had churches. In the days that followed, the man who handled the letters to the editor threatened to quit if he wasn't given either a helper or a fat raise. Goldsmith ran a full page of them one day, all hostile. I never really understood what all the fuss was about.

Even Sue Baney looked at me askance when I picked her up the evening the story appeared. It was our first date in several weeks, and I was hoping to work my way back into her good graces. She had grown angry over a perfectly innocent occurrence but had reluctantly agreed to dinner and a movie.

Before settling on the seat of my recently purchased Hupmobile sedan she said, "Was it Goldsmith who coined that disgusting name? I'm sure it couldn't have been you, Bram. Now everyone's using it, even the radio announcers, without thinking of the frightening effect it will have on children. It was Goldsmith, wasn't it? He's such a crude person."

"Well, uh . . . he thought it was a great idea."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Uh, to tell the truth, Sue, I thought we needed to distinguish him from the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run so—"

"My God, Bram, you mean you are responsible? I never would have believed it. What were you thinking of?"

"Selling newspapers, I guess. I mean that's my job, isn't it?"

"So selling your product justifies having the moral standards of an ape? You know what they call a woman like that, don't you?"

"Now look, Sue—"

"Oh, just shut up, Bram!" She opened the door again, slammed it behind her, and went marching back into her Massillon Road apartment.

I waited a few minutes to see if she'd come out again, then drove off in a huff. So much for a reconciliation. And where was the justice in life? It was me, not the killer, who was seen as the villain.

After the first edition was on the street and things had quieted down the next day, I asked Goldsmith to give me first crack at any other beat that opened up in the future. He laughed.

"What's the matter, Geary, no guts? Rather join the tea drinkers covering the county commissioners or school board meetings?"

"Look, Ben, I'm sick of the police beat. Sick of murders and getting phone calls in the middle of the night to go out to the scene of a plane crash or a fatal accident. It gets to you after a while."

He turned sympathetic. "Look, kid, I understand. I put in my time on the police beat in Chicago back during Prohibition when the gangs used each other for target practice. And anybody else who happened to get in the way. A hot meal and a good night's sleep and you'll be ready

to tackle anything that comes your way."

Somehow I preferred him when he was his usual nasty self. Besides, I knew that his reporting days had been spent in Pittsburgh, not with some paper in Chicago.

He was right, though, as usual. A heaping platterful of Mrs. Bauer's corned beef hash did wonders for my morale. After supper I took a long walk through the East Akron business district, then past the Children's Home where I had grown up. I thought about dull evenings at school board meetings and decided I wasn't so bad off after all. As for women, from now on they'd just have to do without my company.

Soon after the first edition deadline Jack Eddy, his usual cocky self again, came striding into the newsroom and clapped me on the back. Harder than necessary, I thought. "Get off your duff, buddy," he said. "Let's grab some chow."

He had forgotten he was mad at me. I followed him out, thinking we were headed for Pto-maine Tommie's as usual. At six feet three I stood four inches taller than Jack Eddy yet always had to walk faster than usual to keep pace with him. Rather than turning north toward Tommie's at Main Street,

he pulled a surprise by heading south. Across the street the red brick buildings of the Goodrich plant sprawled over several city blocks. On our side was a motley array of saloons, uninviting lunchrooms, and second floor hotels that sent shivers along the spines of fastidious passers-by, business places catering to people down on their luck.

It was half an hour past the factory's noon shift change, but groups of men, those who began and ended work with a shot and a beer at one of the nearby saloons, still crowded the sidewalks at the bus stops. I was about to raise a protest over the route we were taking when Jack turned in at a place with an "Eats" sign hanging at a precarious angle over the sidewalk, an Armenian joint I had noticed in passing but always avoided for the sake of my digestive system. It was typical of industrial area lunchstands, a narrow, boxcar-like room with fifteen or twenty stools at a counter facing the grill and a few wooden booths along the opposite wall. Grease had turned the walls yellow; Goodrich grit crunched underfoot and streaked the once-blue linoleum on the floor. The decor of flyspecked girlie calendars was highlighted by a "No Spitting" sign.

The burly, hooknosed owner sat at the register in front lov-

ingly toting up the day's take to that point. A scarecrow-thin man with a face the color of old cement and droopy bags under his eyes was doing double duty as counterman and short order cook. He came over to where we had settled on stools and took a pencil from behind one ear and a pad of green checks from the pocket of an apron long overdue for a washing. After coughing, then clearing his throat, he said, "What'll it be, gent's?"

"A burger with everything," said Jack, "but start us off with a couple of cups of java, Jimmy."

The man stared at Jack, blinking a few times while he tried to place him. I couldn't believe that Jack knew this human flotsam, had been there before and now returned for a second shot at food poisoning. Figuring a hamburger was as safe a bet as anything on the menu board I said, "Make mine the same."

The man started toward the grill, but Jack stopped him by saying, "Hold on a sec, I want you to meet a friend of mine. Bram Geary, shake hands with Jimmy Medlin."

It took a minute for the name to register. After a limp and greasy handshake, I waited until the man had gone back to his grill before turning to Jack and whispering, "You mean he's *the*

Jimmy Medlin? My God, Jack, he looks fifty."

"What do expect after seven years at Lima? It's not the beach at Atlantic City, you know."

"How'd you learn he was out and working here?"

"A couple of phone calls, friend. The ones you should have made before you wrote that sidebar. Think you'll ever learn to tie up the loose ends of a story?"

"I was on deadline, Jack. There wasn't time. But why did you check him out? What's your interest?"

"Your memory must be going, too, buddy. I'm looking for a man who's dropped out of sight. Remember now, do you?"

"Didn't finding the second body satisfy your client? Anyway, you don't seriously think that pathetic wreck is the Phantom, do you?"

"At this point I don't think anything. Give me a day or two and maybe I'll let you know."

I took another long look at Jimmy Medlin, then said, "Poor guy, he lost the one thing that meant something in his life. I wonder how he got a job in a dump like this?"

"That's what he did at Lima, cooked for the other inmates. He didn't belong there, you know. He went off the deep end when his girl was killed, but he wasn't crazy. At least that's what they

told me at the state hospital. Anyway, his sponsor or whatever they call it had a room on Yale Street and this job lined up for him before they turned him loose."

"Sponsor? Who is he, an old friend or what?"

"A local businessman. Claims he thought Medlin got a raw deal. The authorities felt the same, I guess, so they jumped at the chance to put him back in circulation."

"Why didn't this businessman give him a job?"

"Nothing open, I suppose. Not in Medlin's line, at least. This Peter Hobensack runs a beauty supply operation. Medlin's hardly the type to make a hit in beauty shops."

"Sad, isn't it? I mean think what he must have been, then look at him now. Life handed him a raw deal, Jack."

"Right, friend. Him and a heluva lot of other people."

The big news hit Central Police Station while I was making my final rounds of the afternoon. The second body had been identified, and it wasn't Garland Skeen, the son of Jack Eddy's client in Sandusky. I hurried to the nearest phone booth and called Jack.

After being told he could resume his search for Skeen, Jack said, "Great, just what I want-

ed. Well, at least the guy's mother will be happy. So who was the victim, friend?"

"Hold onto your seat, Jack, this'll floor you. It was Herb List, the man who accidentally killed Jimmy Medlin's girl."

After a low whistle from Jack there was a lengthy silence. I was about to ask if he was still on the line when he said, "I don't get it, buddy. Something doesn't smell right. You saw Medlin, saw what he's like. Can you picture him as your Phantom?"

"Not really, but hatred can do strange things to a man."

"So tell me, buddy, what did Medlin have against the other victim? What was his name, Monahan?"

"Maybe he killed him as a coverup. You know, throw the cops off the scent when he got the man he was really after."

After saying, "You don't have to tell me what a coverup is," Jack laughed scornfully. "Better give that theory a little more thought, ace. Medlin could kill a dozen men, but if one of them was List, everything would still point to him. That damn story of yours may hang him."

"They don't hang people in Ohio. But come on, Jack, the police would have picked up on it anyway as soon as they checked out List's background."

"Correct, buddy. You just gave them a head start."

True. It wasn't my fault, yet I still felt uncomfortable. I checked my watch, saw it was about the time Jimmy Medlin should be going off duty, and hurried off toward the lunchroom across from Goodrich. I wanted to see him again, see if I might have been mistaken and Medlin did fit my image of a killer. Whether he did or not, I knew my next day's story would have to mention his connection with the Phantom's second victim and this time say he was back in Akron. The odds were against either the *Beacon Journal's* or *Plain Dealer's* finding out he was in town by then, so it would mean another scoop for me. That should have pleased me, but it didn't.

He was seated at the far end of the counter, a mug of coffee in front of him, a cigarette in his left hand. The filthy apron was gone, replaced by a khaki windbreaker.

I stopped by the twin metal coffee vats. After Medlin's replacement had drawn a mug and handed it to me in exchange for a nickel, I went back and sat down beside him. He gave me a quick glance and a short nod, the kind a person gives someone they have seen before but can't quite place.

Before there was time for his thoughts to drift away again, I said, "Jimmy, I did a story on

you in the *Times-Press* a while back. Did you see it?"

He took a long drag on his Lucky Strike, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs, then shook his head. "Don't look at the paper much." He wasn't interested, didn't care, not even if he was the subject of a story. He had withdrawn behind an invisible wall, safely hidden in a world he had built for himself, one far removed from that in which the rest of us traveled. Our world had hurt him, wounded him mortally. Now, even though his body moved among us, his mind didn't. We could see him, but he couldn't see us, not really.

He shifted a little so he was facing me, and I was surprised to see the start of a smile on his lips and a faint glow in his eyes. "I read books. Wodehouse, writers like that. That Jeeves is really something, isn't he? Has an answer for everything."

More of his make-believe world. A pair of humorous characters, situations grotesquely funny, a world that could amuse Akronites but was as alien to them as life on Mars. Reality was missing, and that made the stories amusing, even to a lost soul like Jimmy Medlin.

"Go to the movies?" I said.

"Sometimes." Again the hint of a smile appeared. "William Powell and Myrna Loy, they're my favorites."

Another surprise. Powell traveled on dark streets, and Loy was kept busy dragging him back into the light again. As I thought about it, though, it was the same thing, more make-believe. Come what may, Powell never lost his aplomb, Loy never gave in to despair, the happy ending was never in doubt. Perfect entertainment for Depression-weary audiences. Or for a man who didn't savor unpleasant surprises. Cagney, Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, their pictures were not for Jimmy Medlin.

His rejection of the world, the walls he had built, had restored a childlike innocence in Jimmy Medlin. Could a man like this kill? Of course, given the right circumstances. Anyone can. But could he kill as the Phantom of Johnnycake Lock killed? I had no training in psychology yet knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that such acts were beyond the capability of the man beside me.

He had been set up, was being used for a patsy. Bodies found only a few hundred yards from the spot where the girl he loved had been killed, one of them that of the man who had killed her, all within months of his release. What could a lawyer say in his defense? Who would believe it was mere coincidence, or that Jimmy Medlin

had been framed to take the fall for someone else?

This Peter Hobensack, the man Jack Eddy called Medlin's sponsor, was he a good Samaritan—or a Judas?

Jack Eddy slammed the door behind him as he entered the boardinghouse the next evening. From the arched entrance to the parlor he motioned with his head, a curt gesture telling me to follow him out to the hallway.

"The damn fools did it, buddy," he said. "They picked up Jimmy Medlin an hour ago."

"You mean they're charging him with the murders?"

He cast a scornful glance my way. "No, they invited him down for tea and crumpets."

"The sheriff's been under a lot of pressure, Jack. Guess he had little choice."

"Medlin needs a lawyer, and fast."

"The court will appoint someone to defend him."

"Yeah, some hack without clients of his own and all the free time in the world. I mean a good lawyer, the best."

"Who'll foot the bill?"

"Pick up your hat, buddy, and we'll pay a call on that sponsor of his. Maybe he'll be good for it."

We went in Jack's big Auburn sedan, a 1932 model that would have held its own in a collision

with an army tank. Peter Hobensack lived in a century-old house on a hill in Tallmadge not far from the traffic circle, a roundabout that left those trying to enter it with the feeling of pulling out of the pits at Indianapolis with the full field bearing down on them.

We made the trip in silence, giving me time to wonder about Jack Eddy's role in the case. It no longer concerned the missing man from Sandusky. Why would someone driven by ambition care about a down-and-outer like Medlin? The answer, I decided, was that he didn't. He saw the case as another opportunity to show up the police, to grab a few headlines for Wellington's National Detective Agency. And himself, of course. Favorable material for his file at agency headquarters in New York. There was a chance that I was wrong, but it seemed a slim one.

Hobensack answered the ringing of the doorbell himself, a newspaper trailing from his left hand. A frail man pushing sixty, an unlikely Phantom. The paper had informed him of the second victim's identity, but he was shocked to hear of Medlin's arrest.

He led us to a living room with high ceilings and a wood fire burning. His wife brought coffee. Without being asked, he explained how an acquaintance

had told him the story of Jimmy Medlin, how it had aroused his interest so he asked a doctor friend to make inquiries at the state hospital. That led Hobensack to make the three hour drive to Lima, where he talked with Medlin and several hospital officials. The upshot of it was Medlin's release after Hobensack had found him a job and a place to live.

His voice began to waver. "It looks like I made a horrible mistake. I never dreamed he would do something like this."

"He didn't," said Jack. He set his cup aside and leaned forward. "You can bank on that, Mr. Hobensack. There was a time when he might have killed, but it would have been in the heat of passion. Medlin isn't a coldblooded butcher. Trust me, he's been set up."

"Who would do such a thing? How many people would even have known he was a free man and back in Akron?"

"That I don't know. Not yet, but I intend to find out. In the meantime Medlin needs a lawyer. Can you help there?"

Hobensack removed his rimless spectacles, which were spotless, and began polishing them with a handkerchief. "On the assumption you're right I'll take care of it in the morning. After all, if it weren't for me, he'd still be safely in Lima."

On the way home I said, "What do you think, Jack? Is Hobensack the upstanding citizen he appears to be, or is he a good actor with a big knife tucked away somewhere?"

"He's on the level, buddy. Cross him off your list."

"What list? I'm like you and everybody else, I haven't got a clue. From day one the county detectives haven't said boo, but the Akron police have been monitoring it in case it spills over into their territory. On the q.t., Plato Largis told me the county boys have two prime suspects, or did have."

"Who are they?"

"Plato didn't say. Maybe he didn't know."

"Then we'll have to find out for ourselves, buddy."

"What's your angle in this, Jack?"

He was a long time in answering. Finally after a curt laugh he said, "Maybe I'm going soft. That sidebar of yours on Medlin, it got me curious. I did some checking, and then when I took a look at the guy I couldn't help feeling sorry for him. He got one bad rap, friend, and now he's about to get another. It's got me steamed."

"I figured you for a tough guy, Jack. Now you want me to believe you're just another sentimental slob?"

He laughed and gave me a

friendly punch on the arm. "Think whatever you like, friend."

Fine, except that I didn't know what to think. Any psychiatrist or psychologist trying to fit Jack Eddy into a preconceived niche would have gone off the deep end himself.

We had spent the afternoon wandering from place to place in the village of Peninsula. Now I was weary. Not Jack Eddy. He was as tireless as a bloodhound on the scent. It wouldn't have surprised me if he'd thrown his head back and bayed. It was that way every time I tagged along when he was working on a case. I'd be worn out and want to give up, he'd keep pressing ahead, and more often than not it turned out he was right and I was wrong. Sometimes I wondered if I was a natural born quitter.

It started as it usually did with Jack striding into the newsroom at lunchtime and telling me how I was going to spend my afternoon. This frequently led to a good story, so if I had dug my heels in and refused to go along, Ben Goldsmith would have been all over me. I had been skimming the first edition, taking time, though, to read the daily story on Hitler carefully. Now he was

talking about a predominantly German sector of Czechoslovakia, an area most people had never heard of, called the Sudetenland. Didn't the man ever take a day off from his ranting and threatening? Couldn't he sit back just for once and enjoy his unbroken string of successes and conquests?

"Why Peninsula?" I asked as we drove north in Jack's Auburn. "Nothing's happened in Peninsula since the last canal boat passed through. It's a good three miles from Johnnycake Lock, Jack."

"I want to find out more about this Pat Monahan. That was the genuine murder, buddy. The second was merely to cast suspicion on Medlin for both."

"Who says so?"

"I say so."

"The infallible Jack Eddy."

"Just for once try thinking a situation all the way through, sport. Everybody believes Jimmy Medlin killed this guy Herb List. If it had been a lone murder for revenge, that might make sense, but it would have been out of character for him to have killed a stranger first. Medlin isn't crafty; he's not a schemer who would have dreamed up a plan like that."

I agreed but didn't say so. We made the rest of the ride along Akron-Peninsula Road in silence.

Our first stop was a saloon on the only highway passing through the picturesque little town. People tend to clam up if they know they're talking to a private eye, so Jack was an insurance man looking for a few answers before his company paid off a policy on Pat Monahan's life. It didn't seem like much of a pretext to me, but it worked. If anyone had asked, he would have said I was a new man learning the ropes. As usual, though, I could have been the Invisible Man for all the attention people paid to me when Jack Eddy was present.

I never understood why it was that an unfamiliar bartender would grow suspicious if I asked him the time of day but to Jack Eddy he eagerly poured out every bit of information in his head. The guy behind the bar in Peninsula was an interrogator's dream come true. A person couldn't drop into the local lunchstand for a cup of coffee without his knowing about it and looking for an ulterior motive.

Pat Monahan had been a regular at the tavern. From the sound of it he had spent more time there than at the store up the street where he worked.

"He was a real mover, know what I mean?" said the bartender with a wink and the kind of leer that always made me

glad I wasn't a female. With men like him on the prowl it was a wonder any woman made it to twenty-five.

"Chalked up the scores, did he?" said Jack.

The bartender laughed. "With Pat around, a man didn't dare let his wife or girlfriend outa sight, know what I mean? The couple that run the store where he got a job—the broad's not a bad looker for being on the wrong side of forty, and old Pat had her in a swoon before he'd been there an hour. Take it from me, she didn't have a secret left from any man in town after Pat spread the word."

"So he was a talker?"

"Was he ever. Then there was the rich old widow at that big farm east of town. Fifty if she's a day but what the old girls call remarkably well-preserved, know what I mean? Everybody figured Twombly Dietrich was about to walk her down the aisle and latch onto all that dough; then Monahan comes along, and she's head over heels."

"Twombly? Helluva name for a man. What's he do, set hair for the ladies?"

They both laughed and cracked wise. It was the kind of talk that under normal circumstances made me get up and go elsewhere.

"Nah, he's not that kind," said

the bartender. "Rick, that's what everybody calls him, has that lumberyard over Richfield way. Off the job he's a loner. Okay, I guess, but not my cup of tea. I'll say this for him, though, he looks after his kid brother."

"So who doesn't? That's not saying much for him."

"Yeah, but you don't know Tibbals. A real piece of work, he is. Nothing upstairs, know what I mean?"

"Tibbals? Their parents must have had weird senses of humor. Meet my sons, Twombly and Tibbals."

They laughed again, and even I had to smile over that. After they talked a little more, Jack said, "Guess it's not too surprising somebody took a knife to Monahan."

"Yeah, a guy like that makes a lot of enemies."

"How about the other one? Victim, I mean."

"Herb List? He was the last guy in the world you'd expect to end up that way. In here every night lapping 'em up by himself; then at closing time he'd barely be able to walk out of the place. Always sat down there at the end stool. You know what happened to him a few years back, don't you?"

Jack feigned ignorance, so we heard an embellished version of the shooting of Audrey Blaine.

As we walked toward a lunch-

stand down the street, Jack said, "Great guy, isn't he? The kind that makes you wonder if this Hitler bird isn't right and maybe we should exterminate mankind."

"You didn't come across much better."

Jack grinned and gave me a friendly poke in the midsection. "Just doing my job, buddy. Wouldn't get far playing the role of bluenose, would I?"

"You've got a lousy job, Jack. Whenever I get to feeling my line of work turns a man into a rat, I think about you and feel better."

Jack laughed. "You know something, ace, that's the first compliment you've ever paid me."

That was too ridiculous to warrant a response, so I said, "If nothing else, we know that bar was the hangout for both victims. So do the cops, though, so it's nothing new."

It never ceased to amaze me the way Jack Eddy would have women falling all over themselves to please him as soon as he walked through a doorway. His eyes were narrow, his lips thin, his brown hair growing sparse, so where was the appeal? I was taller, had a full thatch of hair, and was better looking all the way around, but after a quick glance they'd turn away. The young waitress at the

otherwise empty lunchstand was typical, acted like she believed Jack was Prince Charming come to carry her off on his white charger.

One thing about Jack Eddy, he certainly could steer a conversation onto the right course. Before I was a third of the way through my cup of coffee, we had heard the full story of how furious Tom Kellums, the owner of the store where Monahan worked, had been over his wife's behavior with the hired help.

"Poor Mr. Kellums. It was scandalous," said the waitress, all wide-eyed and innocent. You didn't have to be an Einstein to tell it would have taken more than a noontime orgy on the street out front to scandalize her.

Somehow Jack turned the talk to Twombly Dietrich. He was right, it was a helluva name for a man.

The girl sniffed at the mention of it. "Mr. Dietrich's a cheap-skate. No matter how much he eats, he never leaves more than a dime under his plate. Sometimes a nickel. I feel like tossing it back at him and saying, 'Keep it, you need it more than I do.'"

I was sure she always managed to overcome the urge.

Jack said, "Maybe he's one of those guys who banks too close."

The girl shrieked with laughter. "Banks too close? The only

time Mr. Dietrich goes to the bank is to try to worm more money out of them."

"Down on his luck, is he?"

"Flat broke's more like it. That's why he was cosyng up to that rich, nose-in-the-air widow woman. Everybody in town was laughing like crazy when she gave him the gate."

"I hear Pat Monahan cut him off at the final turn."

"You can say that again. Now, there was a real gentleman. Well, maybe not a gentleman exactly, but a swell guy, a real sport. You didn't catch him leaving nickels or dimes. He knew how to treat people."

Right, provided the people were wearing skirts.

Jack was all business when we entered the store where Pat Monahan had worked. The owner, Tom Kellums, set his jaw at mention of Monahan. "Hard to believe someone like that would have an insurance policy," he said.

"I understand he wasn't . . . well, a man of good character."

"He was scum."

"Some people figure he got what he deserved."

"Not really. Being chopped up in little pieces was too good for him."

"Hear he made a few enemies around here."

"Look, mister, if you've heard anything at all, you can quit

beating around the bush and come right out with what you're thinking. You're no insurance man, you're another detective trying to play it cute. Sure, I had good reason to kill the bum, but I didn't. Didn't have the guts for it, I guess."

We hit a few more places, heard pretty much the same gossip. When we finally returned to Jack's Auburn and headed back to town, I said, "It's always this way, Jack. We spend hours hearing the same thing every cop within a hundred miles heard before us, then you take a wild guess and sometimes are lucky enough to come up with the right answer. So what is it this time?"

"Come on, buddy, you know it as well as I do. We need one more thing to nail Twombly Dietrich to the wall."

"And what exactly is that?"

"Proof that he heard Jimmy Medlin was back in town sometime between the two murders."

"And the police weren't clever enough to suspect Dietrich? Kelums, too, for that matter."

"Of course they were. Remember Plato Largis said they had two suspects? You can bet Kelums was one and Dietrich was at the top of the list, maybe on the verge of being pulled in. Why else would he have committed the second murder? And it's worked out just the way he

figured, buddy. They forgot him and went after Medlin."

"Pure guesswork. As usual, you're jumping to conclusions, and this time it's based on nothing but idle gossip. Trouble with you, Jack, you think you know it all."

He laughed and gave me a one-knuckle punch on the arm, the kind that hurts. He had taken it as a compliment again.

We arrived home at the boardinghouse on Dudley Street an hour before suppertime. Artie Bauer, the youngest of the landlord's clan, was lying on the parlor floor in front of the big Grunow console radio listening to Jack Armstrong. The All-American Boy's theme song was playing, and "Wave the flag for Hudson High . . ." filled the room at ear-shattering level. "Hey, Bram," Artie called as I passed in the hallway, "let's go up to Hudson sometime and talk to Jack Armstrong."

I paused in the doorway. "Artie, that's make-believe. They aren't singing about the school in that jerkwater town up north of Mid-City Airport."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's a song about Hudson anyplace, not Ohio."

"If it could be anyplace how do you know it's not Ohio?"

"I just do, that's all."

He waved me on with a scorn-

ful, "Aw, you think you know it all." Familiar words. Had I been around Jack Eddy so long that I was beginning to act like him? It was a frightening thought.

After a dinner of beef and noodles with brown gravy over white bread on the side and lemon pie for dessert, I dialed Sue Baney's number and asked for a date. She turned me down flat. I went back to the parlor half angry, half sad and found Mr. Reimer, the retired drug-gist, discussing the fast approaching start of the 1938 baseball season with Jack Eddy. The elderly gentleman, who was never seen without a suit and tie, was an expert on the game except for one small detail: before the opening of every season he believed the Cleveland Indians were going to win the pennant. He might have been right, too, had the Yankees dropped out of the league.

Mabel Klosterman was all dolled up for a date with her sometime boyfriend, the bumbling Joe Kurtz. The vivacious Kitty Bauer came downstairs and told Jack Eddy she was ready to head out for a night of dancing. Her brother Paul, a senior at East High, waved goodbye on his way to a date with a girl from Goodyear Heights. That left Artie, Mr. Reimer, and me dateless. Or so I thought until Mr. Reimer got up saying it

was time to fetch the elderly neighbor lady for their weekly trip to dish night at the Norka Theater.

"Okay, Artie," I said, "tell your mother we're driving up to Hudson to look around for Jack Armstrong."

For lack of anything better to do, particularly anything involving female companionship, I stopped by Jack Eddy's office in the Metropolitan Building after completing my rounds the next afternoon. He was in his private office gleefully exchanging boisterous remarks with Cliff Austin. "I was about to call you, buddy," he said. "I found what I needed, somebody who can verify that Twombly Dietrich knew a week before the second murder that Jimmy Medlin was back in Akron."

"How'd you find this person?"

"I'll tell you later, but right now we've got to head out to Johnnycake Lock. You haven't heard the best part; Cliff just roped Dietrich into meeting him there. Told him he'd found something interesting at the lock and would turn it over to the cops unless Dietrich met him there at four o'clock with big bucks in hand."

"Where's Dietrich going to come up with big bucks?"

Jack threw his head back,

laughing. "Don't you ever get the point, friend? It doesn't matter if he does or doesn't, all we wanted was for him to take the bait and meet Cliff there. If he shows up with a big knife in hand, so much the better."

"Maybe not for Cliff."

"Come off it, sport. Cliff could take him with one arm in a sling."

"How do you know? You've never seen Dietrich, have you?"

"Don't have to, I've seen Cliff. Now come on, we've got to be in position well before Dietrich arrives."

"Position for what, Jack? If you think I'm going to take part in some harebrained scheme, you've got another . . ." He was pushing me out the door, not hearing a word I said.

From the big bend at Akron the Cuyahoga River meanders leisurely northward through a wide valley bordered by wooded hills that from a distance appear gentle and friendly. In reality they are laced with deep ravines and glacial rock formations that can prove deadly to the unwary.

Seldom does the river follow a straight line for more than a short distance before eventually emptying into Lake Erie at Cleveland. The Indians called it the Crooked River. The Cuyahoga was part of their waterway connecting the lake with the

Ohio River and points south. From the big bend they would portage their canoes to the Tuscarawas River, which would carry them to the Muskingum and then the Ohio, the Mississippi, and the Gulf of Mexico.

For a time the Cuyahoga was the western boundary of the United States. Later the Ohio and Erie Canal used its valley as a route between Akron and Cleveland and depended on it as a source of water. Factory and mill owners overlooked its beauty, seeing it merely as a cheap and convenient place to dump their poisonous waste. At its mouth great ships and ore boats used it as a loading and unloading point and a haven from Erie's deadly storms.

The building of the canal brought prosperity to Ohio farmers, who until then lacked a feasible way of marketing their products in the East. When its route was announced, a new town sprang up at the highest point. Until then the site of the town they decided to call Akron was considered worthless, its hills, deep gorges, and shallow bedrock making farming impractical. Early settlers went elsewhere, leaving it to the wolves, panthers, bears, and rattlesnakes.

Following the old towpath wasn't very difficult in March. In summer the foliage would

change that. The canal itself, devastated by the flood of 1913 and abandoned as too expensive to repair, might never have existed for all that could be seen of it in places. At others it was clearly defined, and here and there water stood in stagnant pools or ran lazily toward Lake Erie. In Cleveland it was still used by the steel mills as a source of water.

With the aqueduct over Furnace Run long gone, Johnnycake Lock wasn't the easiest place to get to. A large field, cultivated during warm weather, lay to the east. Houses stood near the old west bank, private property whose owners didn't encourage sightseers, let alone murderers, parading through their yards. From the north, the lock could be approached by picking up the towpath where it ran near the Valley Line Railroad. That's the route we took, and it might have been the one used by the Phantom.

Despite the years of neglect the lock wasn't in very bad shape. Some were in better condition, others far worse. All things considered, it seemed an unlikely place for anyone to use as a dumping ground for bodies or anything else. While a few of the old locks were all but inaccessible, many were far easier to reach and not within sight of houses.

Just south of Johnnycake Lock were the remains of a stone edifice I couldn't identify, although the pile of rocks must have had something to do with the canal. A quarry was not far away, but how had they managed to transport such huge stones before the days of modern equipment? I didn't have much time to ponder the question before Jack decided it would serve as our hiding place while Cliff Austin waited beside the lock. As a place of concealment it didn't impress me, but Jack didn't even deign to reply to my protest.

When I first heard the name Twombly Dietrich, I had visualized the man as a skinny runt wearing wire-rimmed glasses, a real Mr. Milquetoast. I soon decided that couldn't be true. In order to reach manhood a kid called Twombly would have to be handy with his dukes. The picture in my mind changed to one of a man built along the lines of heavyweight champion Joe Louis, or the fighter from whom he had wrested the title a year earlier, Jim Braddock.

I was wrong on both counts. When Dietrich approached from the north, he turned out to be an average looking businessman in a blue suit and cheap overcoat, something I wished I was wearing that cool March afternoon. Hands in pockets, eyes

on the ground, he ambled along like a man carrying the world's troubles on his shoulders.

When he reached the place where Cliff Austin waited, he said, "Look, it's going to take me a little while to come up with any money. What have you got? What did the boy leave behind?"

I turned to where Jack crouched, a puzzled look on his face. He stood up suddenly and went over to the others. I followed as Jack said, "What're you talking about, Dietrich? What boy?"

Having us appear out of the blue caught Dietrich off guard. "My brother. Isn't that what this is about?" Then he realized something was wrong, that he'd been tricked. "Wait a minute, who are you guys?"

It wasn't funny, but I couldn't help myself. Jack turned on me, furious as I let out a roar of laughter. I stopped, though, when it dawned on me that the man's uncanny luck had come through for him again. His deduction had been dead wrong, yet Jack's ploy had paid off with an inadvertent admission of the Phantom's identity. Dietrich had been aware of it all along but had been looking out for his kid brother, covering up for him.

At noon the next day I braved a biting March wind and walked alone to Ptomaine Tommie's. I

was halfway through the usual burger with everything and crisp hash browns when Sue Baney came in and took the stool next to mine. After gulping the food in my mouth I turned and said, "Hi, Sue. How've you been?"

"Fine," she said, then studied a menu she had to have known by heart. She suddenly tossed it down on the counter and said, "No, I haven't, Bram. I've been acting like a fool and I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

I suppose I should have played the tough guy and kept her guessing for a while. Bogart, maybe, lisping, "Look, kid, it's all over." Instead I was like a dog that's been kicked, then at the first kind word goes rushing back to the kicker with tail wagging.

A little later I walked up the street to the Wellington Detective Agency wanting to tell someone that Sue and I had made up and had a date that evening. When I tapped lightly on the open door of Jack Eddy's private office, he looked up scowling. Report forms and assignment sheets were scattered haphazardly on his desk. A cigarette burned in the ashtray, another dangled from one corner of his mouth. He didn't bother to say hello, just, "Whadda you want? I'm snowed, no time for idle chitchat."

Before I could tell him to go to hell, he leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head, and said, "We found that bum Garland Skeen this morning, or rather Cal Andrus did. Living off a woman, holed up at her house in Kenmore while she went out and earned the money to support him. Wasn't a bit guilty about not letting his mother know where he was."

"Nice guy."

"About what you'd expect, buddy. She's been doting on him all his life, making him think he's something special. Whenever he got in trouble, and it happened a lot, he'd go running to mommy, and she'd put things right instead of teaching him he was responsible for his own actions. I'll tell you one thing, friend, a professional criminal, a Dillinger or a Pretty Boy Floyd, is made of better stuff than these selfish, look-out-for-number-one boys."

Jack wasn't too thrilled that Sue and I were back together. "Lucky for you the next stool was empty," he said. "If she'd had to sit at the other end of the counter, it might have been beside her ideal man, which you're not. Like the guy who ducks into a store for a pack of gum, then goes back outside and gets hit by a bus. Forget the gum and the bus is half a mile away when he crosses the street."

"You make it sound like a person isn't in charge of his own destiny."

Jack laughed at that. "Wise up, buddy. What control do you really have? Do all the right things, follow all the right rules, and you've got the world by the tail. Then you go into a store for a pack of gum."

The Phantom of Johnnycake Lock spent the rest of his life behind bars. Not in the state penitentiary but at the hospital for the criminally insane in Lima. Swapped places with Jimmy Medlin, more or less. Some Phantom he had turned out to be. Too stupid to make it through high school, not crazy enough to lock up somewhere before it was too late.

They didn't charge his brother with anything for covering up the truth. It had bothered him from the start, of course, but he felt a little responsible because he had complained at home about Pat Monahan. Tibbals Dietrich, who had been fascinated by the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run, had decided to help his brother's love life by imitating the Clevelander with the sharp knife, then discovered he enjoyed it. List had merely been a convenient second victim when he wandered out of a bar one night in a drunken stupor. After Medlin's arrest Twombly

was guilt-stricken yet had still been reluctant to hand over his not-too-bright kid brother.

Jack Eddy admitted one day that he hadn't found someone who knew Dietrich was aware that Jimmy Medlin was back in town. He had just taken a flyer and had Cliff Austin call with the cock and bull story that Dietrich had swallowed. In that sort of thing a private operative had the advantage over the police. He didn't have to worry about building a case to take to court, just used any means available to get where he wanted to go.

It was frightening, though, to think what might have happened had it not been for Jack Eddy's less-than-scrupulous action. Everyone had been looking for a logical solution, including Jack, and there had been none. That a warped mind was responsible came as no surprise, but still we had believed that logic came into play and it hadn't.

They never caught up with the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run. Eliot Ness, the Cleveland Safety Director who earlier had played a key role in sending Al Capone to prison, escaped the Butcher's knife but even so was one of his victims. Ness couldn't overcome the bitterness Clevelanders felt about his failure to capture the killer. He had come to town with a big reputation and big ideas. He worked won-

ders in cleaning up one of the country's most corrupt police departments. He inherited streets so deadly that even crossing one was an adventure, and quickly cut the death toll in half. But he couldn't catch the Mad Butcher. His attempts to do so were sometimes brutal, so his shiny reputation grew tarnished and eventually was destroyed. He later claimed he knew the Butcher's identity, but a publicity hound like Ness wouldn't have kept it a secret if that had been true.

The tangled wilderness around Johnnycake Lock and the other locks between Akron and Cleveland would one day become part of the National Parks system. Thousands of people would walk the restored towpath and more challenging trails wandering among the hills and glacial rock formations.

People would go on killing each other for little or no reason, of course, escalating the pace with each passing year. As they gained more possessions, they lost the compassion, the helpthy-neighbor outlook, of the Great Depression. A tradeoff, I guess. One that made us richer left us poorer.

After his release Jimmy Medlin went back to work at the lunchstand, then removed his

apron one day in the middle of a shift, walked out the door, and dropped off the face of the earth. I'd gotten in the habit of stopping by once in a while just to talk with him a little and was there when it happened. Nothing unusual had occurred, so I've never understood why he suddenly left the way he did.

After hearing his story Sue Baney wanted to meet him. With reservations about doing so, I took her there that day for lunch. They didn't normally attract customers like Sue, so Jimmy took an immediate liking to her, came out of his shell a little. For some reason he even seemed to see me in a new and more favorable light.

We had finished our sandwiches and were drinking coffee, in no big hurry to leave. While Jimmy was serving someone down the counter, Sue said, "I

like him, Bram. With a friend or two, I bet he'd soon forget all about the past."

I didn't agree but kept my thoughts to myself. Sue seemed to have decided to make Jimmy's return to normality her private project, so I wasn't surprised when she said, "This place needs cheering up. It's so dreary and lifeless, Bram, and that awful sign about spitting. Play something on the jukebox."

I walked to the big machine at the rear of the room. Six plays for a quarter, so I dropped one in the slot and punched half a dozen buttons. Mostly current hits you'd hear all the time on the radio, "Once in a While," "*Bei Mir Bist du Schoen*," "The Dipsy Doodle," "Love Walked In," "Thanks for the Memory," and one oldie, "The Waltz You Saved for Me" . . .

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

Chief Janette Jansen sat in front of her computer screen checking license plate numbers of recent parking violators against those of previous culprits. Not much of a job, she was thinking, for a college graduate with a degree in art. Still, she was grateful to her fellow citizens of Chillicothe for appointing her chief of police. She glanced up to see a tall blonde standing in the doorway. Both young women did a doubletake, then rushed into each other's arms.

"Gigi!" exclaimed the police chief, stepping back and looking at the other closely. "Gigi Gillard! I haven't seen you since graduation, and that was five years ago. You look great! As you can see, my art education didn't exactly pay off."

"Don't say that," retorted Gigi. "You have a job. And you will always appreciate art. I'm struggling along—still single—conducting art tours. Actually, Janette, that's what I came in here about." She handed an envelope to her old classmate. "This was slipped under my motel room door this morning. I need advice—maybe some help." Janette opened the envelope and read the single handwritten page. The message was unsigned:

First names of husbands and wives

Do not initials share.

Likewise with all surnames

And hometowns claimed. Beware!

One couple's not what they pretend.

Your tour may have a drastic end!

Janette Jansen frowned. "What do you make of it?"

"Well, I'm really puzzled. There's a traveling exhibit of early Picassos arriving here at the Chillicothe Museum. I scheduled my tour to include it. At present I have six couples, all from different towns. The husbands' names are Andy, Bill, Carl, Dave, Elmo, and Fred, and the wives' names are Alice, Becky, Cathy, Delia, Elsie,

and Flora. But as the message says, no husband and wife share the same first initial. The husbands follow different professions; one is an engineer."

"What about last names and hometowns?" asked Janette.

"The couples are named McDuff, North, Olson, Perkins, Quigley, and Rollins, and they say they're from Miami, Newport, Omaha, Peoria, Queens, and Rochester—and, again, the initials do not match in any case. So I'm certain the writer of that note is familiar with the people on my tour. It's spooky."

"Hmmm. Well, he or she hints at some crime—something 'drastic.' Perhaps the theft of one of the Picassos on exhibit?"

"Good lord, I hope not. If one of my clients turned out to be an art thief, my tour business would be ruined. And I'd probably be barred from all future exhibits. Janette," she pleaded, "could you possibly attend the exhibit with me this afternoon?"

"Of course, Gigi. I'll get one of my sergeants to take over the office. You've got me curious, too."

Thus it was arranged. Ms. Gillard introduced Janette as "an old friend I ran into here in Chillicothe." During the course of the afternoon Chief Jansen learned that:

(1) Andy, Bill (who wasn't married to Cathy), and Carl (who was neither Mr. Olson nor the husband of the lady in the blue dress) included the architect (who wasn't from Miami), Mr. McDuff (who wasn't from Newport), and the husband from Queens.

(2) Elmo (whose wife was neither Flora nor the woman wearing the white dress), the husband of the woman in the blue dress, and the man from Newport (who wasn't married to Becky) were (in some order) the bartender (who wasn't married to Elsie), the contractor (who wasn't Mr. Rollins), and the dentist.

(3) Dave's wife (who wasn't from Omaha), the woman in the white dress (who wasn't married to the architect), and Flora included Mrs. Olson (who was not from Miami), Mrs. Perkins (who wasn't from Queens), and Mrs. Quigley (who wasn't the wife in the green dress).

(4) Fred, Mr. North (who wasn't from Omaha), and Becky's husband were married to the women in the orange, yellow, and red dresses. The latter was not from Peoria.

The afternoon passed quietly, without incident. It was nearing closing time, and only the couples on the tour still wandered through the exhibit. Police Chief Jansen wished she could concentrate on the Picassos. Then an unearthly scream echoed through the museum halls. Janette ran in the direction it came from.

Three women stood staring down at the body of the fourth. The dead woman had been one of those on the tour. She had been stabbed. No weapon was in sight.

(5) The three standing there included the contractor's wife, the lady from Peoria, and the one in the orange dress. Their first names were Alice (who was not Mrs. North), Becky, and Cathy.

Chief Jansen took charge. "Who discovered the body?" she asked. "I—I guess I did," replied a very shaken Alice. "At least, I was the one who yelled. But Becky and Cathy were right behind me."

"That's right," Cathy confirmed.

"It's so—so horrible!" exclaimed Becky.

(6) The others on the tour joined them, and soon all were conversing in hushed tones. The florist's wife (who was not Elsie), Delia, and the woman in green huddled apart. They included the wife from Miami, the one from Queens, and the one from Rochester (who was not Andy's wife).

"Anybody see who did it?" Jansen asked. No one replied. This would be a difficult case, she realized. Only a member of the tour could have stabbed the woman. But who? Help came when Gigi beckoned to Janette and whispered, "In all the confusion, someone slipped this under my arm. I have no idea who it could have been." Janette tore open the envelope. Another handwritten poem:

*The man whose wife is wearing yellow
Is not a law-abiding fellow.*

She then knew whom to suspect. When he was searched at police headquarters, the bloodstained knife was discovered in his pocket.

Who killed whom at the ill-fated Picasso exhibit?

See page 121 for the solution to the November puzzle.

FICTION



BLUEFISH WEATHER

Sharon Cook

Illustration by Friedrich Haas

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 12/97

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“Janice! Where’s my thermos?”

The voice blasted her out of a deep sleep. It was six A.M. She sat up in bed, disoriented. Why was her husband calling her at this hour? Then she remembered: it was the first day of Roger’s vacation. As always, he was going fishing.

She swung her legs out of bed, scuffing her feet across the sandy floor, feeling for her slippers. Though it was August, the cottage was cool in the morning. During the winter it was arctic; the heat from the little woodstove never reached the bedroom on the second floor, and it was not unusual for her to go to bed wearing a knitted cap.

Janice didn’t bother with her bathrobe. If she didn’t reach the kitchen fast and help her husband find his thermos, he would start bellowing again and wake up her father. Her father was eighty-five years old. If he woke up, he’d insist on getting up. The strong sleeping pill he took every night wouldn’t have worn off, and he’d not only be agitated, he’d be confused.

She walked into the kitchen to the welcome smell of coffee. The automatic coffeemaker gurgled and hissed. Next to it Roger’s tackle box sat open on the counter. He was flinging open cupboard doors, slamming drawers.

“Where’s my goddamn thermos, Janice? I can’t go fishing without my thermos!”

Janice ignored him. She knelt in front of the sink, pulled open the bottom drawer, and removed a large scarred metal thermos. Holding onto the sink she got to her feet.

“I washed it for you. It smelled sour.”

Roger grabbed the thermos and hurriedly filled it with coffee, his back to her.

“Don’t touch my stuff, Janice. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Shhh!” She tiptoed to a door next to the refrigerator. In the sliver of light that peeked in from the bottom of the window shade she could see her father in bed. His profile was sharp against the pillow. Even after she gently closed the door, she could hear his snoring.

“Chrissake,” Roger said, fitting the thermos into his green tackle box, “those sleeping pills would put a water buffalo under for a week. You trying to get rid of him permanently?”

Janice decided to ignore the remark. Roger was most likely hung over and trying to get her goat. He was not the one who got up in the middle of the night to calm her father when he woke up frightened. If she didn’t give her dad a sleeping pill, he’d attempt to get

out of bed. Should he fall at his age, he'd break a hip or a leg, and that would be the end for him.

"Will you be home for dinner?" she asked. He was at the front door. Over his shoulder she saw the sun, a shimmering ball of fiery orange, coming up over Misery Island.

He paused and fished a cigarette out of a wrinkled pack. "Depends on how many bluefish I catch. If it's a good catch, I'll be home, maybe throw a couple on the grill. Otherwise I'll stay at the marina for a while, check out the boats."

She shivered in the salt breeze that blew in through the open door. "Good luck."

Janice crept back up the stairs. She had another hour or two before her father woke up; she burrowed back into her blankets. She knew Roger wouldn't be home for dinner. The Herring Cove Bluefish Tournament was on, and she didn't expect to see much of him all week. If he wasn't sitting on the beach with his cooler, he'd be at the marina attempting to hustle the women, shooting the breeze with the bartender, drinking all night. Any fish he caught he would give away. They would never end up, brushed with butter and lemon, on her grill. It had been a long time since she had eaten fresh-caught bluefish.

For the millionth time in her five year marriage she wondered how she could get out of this mess called *her life*.

"Janice! Janice!" Roger stood on the beach waving his red T-shirt. She saw him through the front window when she came out of the kitchen carrying a plate of sliced bananas. Out on the back porch her father was sitting with a TV tray in front of him. He wore a Red Sox baseball cap. Janice put the plate in front of him. "I'll be right back, Dad. I'm going down to the beach for a minute. Roger is calling me."

Her father was hard of hearing, and he hated to wear a hearing aid. "Who?"

"Roger," she said leaning close to his ear.

"Oh, him. Well, take your time, dear."

He'll tell me that, she thought, hanging her apron on a hook in the pantry, and then two minutes later he forgets where I am and starts calling to me. Taking care of an old person was as much work as taking care of a baby, though she had never had a baby. Actually, taking care of an elderly person was *more* work: a baby becomes independent and requires less care, while an old person needs more and more attention.

Two years ago Roger had talked about putting her father in a nursing home. "We can sell the house, Jan. We can travel *any place*." Her head full of images of an open convertible whizzing along the Costa del Sol, she had gently broached the subject with her dad. Her father had looked so sad—like a kid discovering his pet dog had been run over. Janice knew she would never be able to make that decision no matter how helpless her father got. No, she couldn't ship her father off to a "home." He was all she had.

The sands were dotted with colorful beach umbrellas. Standing at the railing she looked down at the crowds—so many people. Every year more and more tourists discovered Herring Cove. They all wanted to rent one of the cottages that lined the boardwalk. Janice's father had bought their place almost fifty years ago, for three thousand dollars. Now she could get at least two hundred thousand for the place, as shabby as it was. People were willing to pay that price just for the opportunity to look out at a silvery moon shining down on the ocean—right in their front yard.

But things at the beach sure had changed over the years. When Janice was a kid, there had been a scattering of cottages rising over the seawall. Now every available inch of space was taken up with condos and modern A-frames, totally out of place among the old fashioned shingle-style wooden cottages. The tall beach grass she and her friends used to hide in and the bushes of wild beach roses were gone, replaced with crisp lawns like wall-to-wall carpeting.

At the very end of the beach, where the day tourists parked, shops had sprung up between the condo buildings and motels. They sold T-shirts, fried dough, bikinis, and rubber rafts. The stately old wooden hotel where her parents used to take her for Sunday night dinner had been torn down and replaced with an ugly motel. The owner had strung Christmas lights around the patio, which Janice and her father could see from their porch at night. She could also hear the loud music and noise from the bar. Her husband liked to walk over to the bar at night. Janice approved of this; at least he wouldn't be driving home drunk behind the wheel of his Thunderbird.

The Scippione sisters were of an undetermined age, though Janice guessed they were in their late thirties. While their skin was leathery from sun worship, their bodies were hard from workouts. Both had hair the color of scrambled eggs, their mouths painted a

bright red. Even while swimming the sisters wore jewelry: earrings, heavy gold rings, ankle chains. When Janice had first met them, she learned they had rented "Cozy Nook," a bungalow-style cottage in the back row, for the last two weeks in August.

Now they sat in beach chairs flanking Roger. Lila—or Lola, she could never remember which was which—stretched her muscular legs out on the cooler. The intense rays of the noon sun reflected off her dark, oiled skin. Lila/Lola flexed her calves and wiggled her toes, showing off red polish. Both sisters held glasses wrapped in foam rubber insulated "jackets." Her husband was in the act of filling those glasses from his metal thermos. He sucked in his stomach as he stood in front of them. Roger, forty-five years old, was still a handsome man despite the late nights of waterfront boozing. His good looks were endangered, however; the strong jawline was losing its clean definition. Up close the complexion that looked so ruddy from a distance was a fine crosshatching of tiny broken veins. When he was on the road selling marine equipment, she knew he visited a salon and got his hair colored to keep the gray at bay. She'd found a receipt in his car. Janice wondered how he would react when women someday stopped responding to his attentions.

To say Roger had been "neighborly" toward the Scippione sisters would be a gross understatement. He was often at their house, repairing a malfunctioning refrigerator or fixing the VCR, he claimed. "I can't help it if I'm a people person. I'm not like you, Janice. I don't go around judging people." Sometimes, on her husband's invitation, the Scippione sisters had cocktails on Janice's porch. They exclaimed loudly over everything; it was all "adorable" in their eyes: the old wicker rocker, her father's models of fishing boats, even her father himself was adorable.

Spotting Janice standing above them on the seawall they gestured frantically for her to come down. "You're missing this fabulous sun!" one of the sisters yelled. Tourists never understood how it was for the residents who lived at the beach community year-round; they couldn't believe Janice preferred not to bake in the sun every day.

"Janice," Roger turned in his chair and looked up at her, "get me the corkscrew, will you?" One of the sisters opened the cooler, and Janice saw mounds of glistening ice packed around frosty bottles. When the woman twisted her body around, her heavy breasts almost parted company with the stretchy orange bathing suit. She called up:

"We're gonna make sangria later, Jan. You be sure to come down, okay? And bring that cute daddy of yours."

"I have to get him into his recliner. This is his naptime." They thought it was so easy—just bring him down on the beach. And how was she supposed to get him down the narrow steps to the beach? By airlift?

Roger made a face at his wife. He held a dripping can of beer pressed against his furry chest. He said to the sisters, loud enough for Janice to hear, "Mother Teresa can't take a break. She's got diaper detail." One of the sisters let out a loud shriek. They covered their mouths, their gleaming shoulders shaking with laughter.

As she turned and walked up to the cottage, Janice heard: "Oh, Roger, you are *wicked!*"

Russ, her neighbor, sat on his front porch watching his grandchildren jump off the porch railing into the sand. "Watch me, Grandpa!" they shrieked, lining up to take turns. He lazily waved to Janice as she walked up her steps. Janice wondered what the neighbors thought of her marriage. Many of the older residents had known her since she was a child. They had loved her mother and father. She remembered the clambakes and cookouts the families had organized on the beach, the babies crawling around in the sand.

Maybe the neighbors had assumed Janice would remain an "old maid." Though she was an attractive woman, when she turned thirty-five, she had given up on ever finding a mate. Janice knew the type of marriage she wanted, one like her parents had shared. It had been a courtly, old fashioned union. Her father always remembered to observe the niceties—to take his wife's arm on the street, to pull her chair out before she sat down. Janice remembered his frequent remark to her when something puzzled him: "Let's ask Mother, shall we?"

Like most only children Janice occasionally wished she'd had a sister to share secrets with. However, her relationship with her parents had been so special she was grateful she'd been the sole recipient of their affections. Their lives together, especially during winters at the beach when most of the cottages had been boarded up, had been like a dream. She cherished one memory from her childhood: the three of them sitting around the woodstove pretending they were castaways, survivors of a shipwreck. In winter, standing at the ice-encrusted railing and looking out at the flat gray ocean and snow-topped Misery Island in the distance, they had felt like

the only people in the world. Her family shared this winter world with other denizens of the beach—sandpipers and seagulls, plus an occasional dog from town who would come to their door knowing Janice's father was good for a handout.

She had gone to a small agricultural college, majoring in greenhouse management. She loved growing things; at the beach Janice kept pots of nasturtiums and flowerboxes filled with portulaca. The neighbors once said that if Janice couldn't coax something out of the sandy soil, no one could. When her mother died, she was glad to get the job at the flower shop. The last year of her mother's life, when she had stayed home and taken care of her, had been a long and draining ordeal for Janice. After that experience she had no interest in going out on dates, or frivolous chatter, or immature men who acted like little boys.

Until one spring day, the daffodils nodding in the sunshine, when Roger, all dressed up in a Madras sports jacket, had walked into the flower shop. All she could see were his eyes, the color of the ocean in May. While he admired the flowers, she had on impulse handed him a purple iris for his lapel. She had even pinned it there, inhaling the scent of his neck. He smelled like fresh limes—and sweat, a good, healthy sweat. Her boldness was uncharacteristic; Janice was always shy around men, especially a man as handsome as Roger.

She thought to herself, here was a man of experience; there was nothing boyish about this stranger. He had been around. And for some reason this thought dazzled Janice. She forgot the reason Roger had come into her shop, to buy a dozen red roses for someone special, he'd said. No man had ever bought flowers for Janice. In her mind the handsome stranger was buying roses *for her*.

After they had been married for a couple of years, she asked him who he had been buying roses for when he walked into her shop. At first Roger didn't know what she was talking about. He'd been leaning over the pool table in the basement about to place a shot and didn't answer her at first. After sinking the ball in the pocket, he lit a cigarette and looked up at her, frowning in the act of remembering. "Roses . . . roses," he mused, tapping the cue stick against his knuckles. "If it was roses, it must have been Pamela, the nurse. She had a great body." Turning his back to Janice and resuming his position at the pool table, he said, "Yeah, if it was roses it was probably her."

If her husband had difficulty remembering Pamela with the great body, he surely wouldn't remember his second visit to the flower

shop, dressed in a T-shirt this time and looking for a plant for his mother, he claimed, winking at Janice. He picked out a pot with a single geranium. Then he asked Janice if she wanted to go for a ride in his boat after work.

Watching Roger peel out of the parking lot in his convertible, Janice had felt she'd been sprinkled with fairy dust and had entered another dimension, the happiness zone. Regrettably, she hadn't remained in this state for long. Her new husband, she discovered, liked to buy cocktails for fairhaired women in dark bars. She consoled herself with the thought that life wasn't a Disney movie. Happy endings are reserved for make-believe people like Snow White and Cinderella. There are no guarantees in life, she thought. All we have is hope. Tattered hope, at that.

She found her father standing supported by his aluminum walker in the kitchen. His knuckles, clutching the handles, were white. Janice stood in the doorway blocking his entry. "Where were you, Janice? I called and called." His skin, when she placed her hand upon his forehead, was clammy from the effort of walking. She eased him back onto the porch. She felt guilty for leaving her father alone, unsupervised. What if he had tried to go down the back stairs? Janice got him settled in his recliner and smoothed a blanket over his lap. She held his hand while he fell asleep.

In the distance over the cries of seagulls she heard, "Janice! Janice!" Then she remembered: her husband had asked for a corkscrew. She slowly removed her hand from her sleeping father's grip. His head tilted back, he whistled through his nose.

Janice heard the music from the radio long before she saw the trio on the beach. They were singing along: "Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer . . ." Roger was standing, legs apart, twisting his hips to the music. He wore one of the sisters' straw hats with big floppy flowers on the brim. The sisters tilted back and forth in their chairs. They waved their arms over their heads, snapping their fingers.

When the sharp, spiraling end of the metal corkscrew, thrown from the seawall, landed inches away from Roger's foot in the sand, he immediately stopped singing. He stared down at the object as though it had fallen to earth from a UFO. The sisters, sensing a change in mood, stopped singing "*. . . those days of soda and pretzels and beer . . .*"

"The hell, Janice." Roger stuck his beer can carefully into the sand

and slowly and deliberately walked to the seawall until he was standing directly below his wife. The sisters, silent, watched him. He whipped off his mirror sunglasses; the skin around his eyes was pale, in sharp contrast to his fiery red nose. He shaded his bloodshot eyes and looked up at Janice, who was a dark silhouette against the afternoon sun.

"What's the story, Jan?" he asked quietly.

"Dad's all alone. I've got to get back to him. You want anything else?"

"I want an explanation of why you just tried to spear me. Are you going to tell me or do I have to come up there and persuade you?"

"Look, Roger, it was an accident. You know I've got lousy aim."

She glanced at the sisters now smoking cigarettes; their faces expressionless. One of them shouted out to Roger, "Hey, what about that sangria?"

Roger turned around slowly as though remembering where he was. He pulled the corkscrew out of the sand and raised it in the air like a sword. "Did someone mention something about a bottle of red wine?"

The sisters jumped up, squealing, happy that the good mood was restored. This time they didn't ask Janice to join them.

The wheelchair kept sinking into the sand on either side of the narrow concrete walkway. Janice pushed her father past the last row of cottages until she reached the dusty parking lot. Wiping sweat from her forehead, she opened the passenger door of the car. Now for the tricky part—transferring her father from the chair into the front seat of her car. Following that, the awkwardness of folding the wheelchair and squeezing it into the trunk.

Despite the early evening hour, heat poured out of her car when she opened the door. At that moment her neighbor, Russ, crossed the lot wiping his hands on his shorts. He didn't ask if he could help, he just took over the operation, getting her father to his feet, rotating his body, and finally lowering him so that he was in the front seat of her car. Then he folded the wheelchair and put it in the trunk.

Finished, he tugged on the visor of her father's Red Sox cap. "Going to the Bluefish Festival in town, Slugger?"

"I've won it many years. The fishing tournament," her father said, squinting up at Russ.

"That's right," Jan said. "He used to be a sea captain."

"I had three boats," her father said, coming out of his stupor and talking excitedly. "Gillnetters. We used to go out for a whole week sometimes. I had some nice fellas working for me then. Real nice." His voice trailed off.

"Good for you," Russ said. He looked at Janice. "Is Roger in the bluefish tourney?"

"He'll be the first one at the dock tomorrow morning," she said. "He's been fishing all week." She was certain Russ knew what else he had been doing, but he merely smiled.

"You two have fun in town," he said.

Driving into town Janice felt her spirits brighten. She had been awfully glum lately; she couldn't afford to fall into a slump. I mustn't lose faith in myself, she thought. After all—and here she felt a stab of guilt when she glanced at her dad, who looked so pleased to be going for a ride—her father wasn't going to live forever. She had to face facts and prepare for her future. The money she made from the eventual sale of their house could buy a nice florist shop—with maybe a little apartment adjoined. Her father would want her to be happy, and the only way she could get away from Roger and become independent was by selling the cottage. It would be like selling off her childhood, but she had to make a *new life*.

Surely she could hold out for as long as her father was alive. To everything there is a season, she thought.

The Bluefish Festival attracted crowds every year; tonight they clogged the streets. Everywhere she looked there were tourists snapping pictures of the boats decorated with flags and lights. Vendors and their pushcarts were on the streets selling pretzels, cotton candy, sausage rolls. Music from the bars blared out of open doorways. Teenagers threw firecrackers into the street. Janice inched along in traffic that stopped occasionally to let the noisy revelers cross.

Suddenly she saw her husband, his arms around the Scippione sisters, walking in front of the car ahead of her. Janice sank back in her seat as the sisters, wearing tight pants and tanktops and teetering in high-heeled sandals, crossed the street. Roger was wearing the straw hat tilted over one eye. She heard their raucous laughter.

She didn't want her father to see them. To distract him, Janice turned and said, "We might not be able to get a parking space any place around here, Dad. Would you mind if we just drive through?"

"I don't mind. Too many people anyway. Never used to be like this."

As her car made slow progress down the street, Janice kept her eyes straight ahead. At a break in the traffic she turned up a side street and headed back toward the beach. Before they were out of the city limits her father, his eyes closed, said, "Don't worry about him, dear. Things will work out."

Janice couldn't believe her father had seen Roger in the street. "Who's that, Dad?"

He didn't open his eyes. He said, "You know who."

She rummaged through the kitchen cupboard, pushing aside jars of mustard, spice cans, and ketchup bottles. Her father's sleeping pills were missing. For the second time Janice searched the shelves, but she couldn't find the plastic vial. Could her father have taken them? He'd been up and around yesterday. She'd read articles about depression in the elderly; was he planning to commit suicide?

She looked at him sitting at the kitchen table, his thin fingers wrapped around a cup of warm milk. The overhead lamp cast deep shadows on his face. His bony head under its fringe of white hair was skull-like in the yellowish glow. She knew her father hated being dependent on her. He hated being unable to walk down the stairs unaided. He couldn't dress or feed himself. Did this make him depressed enough to want to end it all? Janice would have to keep an eye on him and tomorrow, while he was on the back porch, go through his pockets, turn the mattress over until she found those pills.

That night she dreamed a huge fish approached her while she was swimming. Panicked, she was about to swim away when the fish opened its mouth. A bottle of pills lay inside.

Janice sat up in bed. She heard waves crashing on the shore and the loud hiss as they retreated into the sea. She heard frogs croaking down at the salt marsh behind the parking lot. Downstairs a door closed. Wrapping a terry robe around her shoulders, she crept down the stairs. The only light in the living room came from the moon shining a path on the water.

Roger was in the kitchen, his back to her, spooning coffee into the filter basket. Black coffee grounds like swarms of ants lay on the floor and the counter. His tackle box was on the kitchen table, his thermos in the sink.

Janice was relieved it wasn't her father in the kitchen. She said in a low voice, "Turn the light off when you're through, Roger. And please try not to wake Dad."

He slowly turned and stared at her. His face was pale under his tan. "Don't creep up on me like that, Janice. And don't order me around."

"I'm just asking you not to make any noise."

He turned the faucet on to wash out his thermos. Water splashed over his rumpled shirt as he tried to fill the opening in the the container. "Your father's not going to wake up. He sleeps like a dead man—all the drugs you give him."

"He'll wake up tonight. I couldn't find his pills." She narrowed her eyes. "You don't know anything about that, do you?"

Roger winked at her. His face had the stunned, blank expression of a drunk. "Wouldn't you like to know. Why don't you just give him the whole bottle? What kind of life is that—can't even take a leak without his daughter pulling down his pants. Bag of bones. Better off dead if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you," she said. "And why don't you move in with your bimbos. Why do you stay here with us?"

Roger turned off the faucet. He carefully wiped his hands on a dishtowel. His voice was very quiet. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Janice? You'd like me to leave so you could sell this place. I know you. I know what you have in mind." He pointed a steady finger at her. "Just you remember this: my name is on the deed, too. When we took that loan out to make repairs? The bank wouldn't give it to us unless my name was on the deed. And you signed it, giving me permission."

Janice remembered signing some papers last year when they'd applied for the loan after the storm. She didn't remember signing anything regarding the deed. But there had been so many forms that her husband had given her to sign she'd been grateful that he'd handled all the technicalities. It suddenly dawned on her—why else would he be so helpful?

"You didn't," she whispered.

He turned back to the coffeemaker. "You broads are so dumb."

The next day was hot and muggy. Janice swept the front porch while battling the greenhead flies that came up from the marsh when there was little breeze off the ocean. The Scippione sisters, their vacation nearing an end, lay stretched out on the beach like

mummies under the heavy sun. All day the weather stayed torpid; the beach was strangely quiet as a lassitude, pervasive as the moist air, crept over its residents.

Her father sat on the back porch, oblivious to the buzzing green-heads that bounced off the screens. His skin was as white as the bleached bones of seabirds that washed up on the tide. He slept, slack-mouthed and snoring. Janice sat in the chair next to him fanning herself with a magazine. Her husband could never understand why they didn't have air conditioning in the cottage. "No one at the beach has air conditioning," she'd told him. "People come here for the salt breeze."

"The new condos at the end of the beach have air conditioning," he'd said. Roger had been talking a lot about the new condos, a huge stucco building with a blue Mediterranean-style plastic roof. He'd even gone for a tour. Janice had dismissed his interest at the time. Now it occurred to her . . . could he force a sale of her cottage?

Her father opened his eyes, blinking at Janice as though trying to place her. "Too hot out front," she said. "I don't suppose it'll be good fishing weather."

Her father closed his eyes. She thought he'd fallen asleep, but he said, "Not at all. This is bluefish weather." Janet sat listening to the persistent flies at the screen. She must have dozed off herself because she awakened to the sound of sheets on the clothesline snapping in a wind that had suddenly come up. People carrying beach towels and baskets were hurrying down the walkway trying to avoid the big drops of rain that darkened the concrete. In the front of the house huge gray clouds gathered on the horizon silencing the seagulls that stood in clusters at the water's edge. Heat lightning flashed on the horizon.

After Janice got her father into the darkening house, she ran upstairs from room to room, closing the windows against the rain and wind. Downstairs she and her father sat at the window and watched the ocean turning from green to gray, its surface whipped into a frenzy.

Later, while she was heating her father's milk on the stove, she heard a loud knocking on the front door. She looked at her father. Their eyes met.

"Ask who it is," he said, reaching for his walker.

"You sit right there," she said. "It's probably a neighbor, Russ or someone, wanting to use our phone." She could see the man's bulky

figure at the door. Behind him lightning flashed on the water. The wind that blew in with him smelled strongly of seaweed.

"Ma'am? It's me, Lou Grimes. Police department. Can I come in?" Janice recognized the man from his weekend patrols on the beach where he occasionally kicked groups of noisy teenagers, and their kegs, from the beach.

"Come in. Come in." Janice closed the door against the wind. The man was wearing a black poncho that dripped on the floor when he took it off.

"Sorry about the mess," he said. He nodded his head to Janice's father at the table. "Evening, sir," he said loudly.

"Sit down, officer," Janice said, motioning to a chair. She stood behind her father's chair. Before he sat down, Officer Grimes took out a small notebook and pen.

"Maybe you should sit, too," he said gently to her.

"I'll stand for now, thank you. You have bad news. It's about my husband, isn't it?" She gripped the back of her father's chair.

"I'm afraid it is. I know Roger . . . *knew* your husband . . . from the marina. I keep a little boat there myself." He opened his notebook and then looked up at her. "He was the owner of the *Lady Godiva*?"

Janet could see the cop didn't want to tell her. "Yes. What happened to my husband?"

The cop took a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped the back of his neck where rain dripped off his hair and down his collar. He looked from Janice to her father. "The Coast Guard found him not long ago. Storm washed his boat aground on Misery Island. The medical examiner thinks he had a heart attack or a stroke."

"Are you sure?" Janice couldn't believe what she was hearing. Roger had been as strong as a plowhorse.

The man looked down at his little notebook. "They tested his blood for alcohol. It was pretty high. We found a couple of empty bottles in the boat." He gave her a weak smile. "I know this is festival week. Everyone in town gets a little crazy this time of year." He closed his notebook and put it back in his pocket. "I made a positive identification. It was your husband all right. We like to spare people as much as we can." He glanced at her. "You can see him if you'd like, but I have to tell you his skin's been burned pretty bad from exposure. Would you like an autopsy? The coroner will do it if you request it."

Janice sank into the chair next to her father's. "I don't think so. No."

"God, no," her father said, putting his hand over hers.

"Your husband didn't take drugs, did he?"

"Drugs? No, of course not. He was a . . . a drinker."

"It's a bad combination, the booze and the sun. People do it all the time." Then he stood up. "If you wait a second, I'll get his tackle box. It's out in the cruiser."

When the door closed, Janice looked at her father. "Dad, I can't believe it."

"A nice cop," he said, watching the door. When the policeman returned carrying the green fishing box, Janice jumped up. Seeing it made the whole thing real for her.

"Where do you want me to put this?" the cop asked.

Janice pointed to the kitchen. "In there. On the floor."

The cop picked up his poncho at the door. He cleared his throat. "Since you're not requesting an autopsy, what we do is we take the body to Swenson's Funeral Home. You can call them tomorrow, make arrangements."

Janice thanked Officer Grimes and opened the door. "Sorry again," he said, shaking her hand. "This is the worst part of the job."

Ignoring the fishing box, which Officer Grimes had discreetly placed between the stove and refrigerator, Janice poured the cooling milk into her father's mug. She hastily placed it in front of him, spilling some on the table and not bothering to wipe it up.

"Dad," she said, "you sit right there. Don't go anywhere. I have to walk, clear my head. I'm just going to the end of the boardwalk." Her father nodded; she knew he wanted to ask for his bedtime cookie, but this time something in his daughter's voice silenced him. She threw on her yellow slicker and pulled a kerchief on, tying it tightly under her chin. The rain had let up, but the wind battered at her as she walked fast, one hand clinging to the metal railing, pulling herself along. The pounding surf drove all thought from her mind. She walked numbly looking at the cottage windows as she passed, each one shuttered against the storm.

When she reached the end of the boardwalk, a thought insinuated itself into her mind: her husband's insurance policy. Roger had an insurance policy at work naming Janice, his only relative, beneficiary. She couldn't remember how much it was for, but she knew it was enough so that she wouldn't have to worry about funeral bills or the taxes on the house or the maintenance work that was as inevitable as greenheads in August. Thinking about the insurance policy while her husband lay dead in a morgue automatically made her feel guilty.

She looked out at the wild surf and felt the first spasm of remorse—and regret. It didn't have to be this way, she thought. We could have had a decent marriage, like other people's.

When she got back to the house she saw, through the front window, her father's empty chair. The walker was not next to it.

"Dad?" she called at the door. She heard water running in the kitchen. There was enough light from the living room lamp for her to see her father at the kitchen sink, elbows leaning on his walker. Steam rose around him, dampening his thin white hair. He hadn't heard her calling. Her father was scrubbing, showing an energy Janice hadn't seen in years. He was washing her husband's metal thermos, scrubbing vigorously, as though his life depended on it.

SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":

No-no, the intended victim, was Fidelia the grandmother. Her attacker was felled by the tenpin thrown by her grandson Cyril, the juggler.

TOWER ORDER	NAME, AGE, RELATIONSHIP	INSTRU- MENT	HIGHWIRE ACT	CLOWN NAME
6	Elena, 35, mother	fife	unicycle	So-so
5	Cyril, 15, son	tuba	juggling	Jo-jo
4	Dorinda, 14, daughter	saxophone	carried	Bo-bo
3	Fidelia, 56, grandmother	clarinet	blindfold	No-no
2	Boris, 57, grandfather	drum	carrier	Do-do
1	Alexis, 36, father	mandolin	back flip	Yo-yo

FICTION

The Lady of the Alley

Ann Woodward



“I cannot have, in my life, the complication of a child by this woman,” the Middle Captain said.

It was late in a hot night of the Sixth Month. He was not a man Lady Aoi knew well, and he was very drunk, on his way home from a banquet, or he would never have spoken so crudely. Behind her fan she drew her mouth tight with distaste.

“How glad I am that my cousin brought me to meet you that time,” he said. “I have not found such a sympathetic lady in all my acquaintance.”

The summer garden breathed freshness, the moon, half full, rode high, its image on the garden pond scattered and broken by gentle waves. They sat without a lantern, on the verandah outside Aoi’s room. Such a night was not for sleeping, and Aoi had been alone, hearing merriment from the departing banqueters and waiting for the complete stillness that would come later, in the hour of the Ox. At such times, in the depths of summer, she could forget all concerns and breathe with the plants, the water, as the wind breathes.

“Perhaps you should not mistake simple listening for sympathy,” Aoi said, but she knew it was hopeless. He was troubled, and talking eased him. Later, if he remembered at all what he

had said, his drunkenness would excuse such a personal outpouring. And she, in spite of her pretense of annoyance and boredom, was as usual entirely unable to master her interest in the affairs of this world. Many women like Aoi—widowed and childless, already past the age of thirty, with no strong personal ties—would be thinking of retiring from the world to meditate and care for their souls. Aoi at times of discouragement sometimes considered such a life, away in the mountains somewhere, among pines. But she was too easily drawn to the ordinary pleasures so abundant in a royal household, too busy observing the franknesses and evasions, the acts of grace and spite that she saw in others, ever, she thought, ever to leave. Ah! she often chided herself, you are too bound to the world. You will come to grief.

The Middle Captain had already told her of his wife, older than he, cold and disapproving, often not receiving him in her father’s house where she quite properly lived in the old-fashioned way. Her parents, he said, doted on him though he couldn’t understand why. This was pretense. Though he was now only a Middle Captain in the Palace Guards, he was the second son of a famous father, most favored of his generation in a powerful

family and sure to advance in the government. Even in his present fummy, loose-limbed state he was vibrantly handsome. The skin of his cheeks was flushed more with health than with wine; the mauve straps of his high court cap of black lacquered gauze contrasted richly with the gleaming black of closely bound hair. His clothes were fine, chosen carefully for the banquet, and though the trousers had lost their pleats and the outer robe had slipped and come unfastened, bright summer linen of willow green and azure suited him.

He had told her of the fine lady who lived in the Sixth Ward, how he yearned for her, how she was warm and accepting at times, at times bitter that she could never be his principal wife, at times railing and accusing because he could not make her a second wife in a suitable house of her own. "I have explained that a poor Sixth Rank guardsman has only a small income, I have begged her . . ." His voice had trailed off almost into tears.

"Have you tried leaving her?" Aoi had said.

"Oh yes. But she is so perfect, there is really no one like her. You should see her letters, the handwriting alone . . . She will be proud and silent for a while. Then I begin to worry and get off

a note, just to make sure nothing has happened to her. And back will come a piece of paper the color of clouds on an almost rainy day, tied with a green tip of vine and a closed morning glory, the ink faint as a sigh. And I rush back to her side."

And he had told her of the lady of the alley.

"It was pure accident that I found her. We had gone into the back streets chasing a man who dropped over the palace wall in broad daylight. Suddenly I turned around and saw that I was completely alone. These days that is really not safe, even for a guardsman with a bow in his hand and a quiver rattling on his back. Everyone can see, from our red coats, who we are. Those who rob and set fires go in bands, but they are not marked as we are, they wear no uniforms. There were men about, in that narrow little place; they passed, they stopped, they collected."

"The times deteriorate, here at the latter end of the Law, and society declines." It was thought that Buddhist teachings were losing their power and that an age of decadence approached. Aoi's comment was a common one, deploring the disorder of the present day.

"Yes. We are recruiting from the provinces, and these rough men—some of them have served

against the rebellious Ezo natives in the north—they are trying to train us. We are to exercise, we shoot, they think we should actually learn to fight with poles and with our hands. We have no aptitude, and there are many absences and excuses. Night duty is becoming very popular. These are strange times when even the Palace Guards must become bold.”

“Ah,” said Aoi, “bold.” Guards and police were indeed not known for bravery. Most criminals came from the western half of the city, across the wide central avenue, and for years there had been no law there. The streets teemed with people; houses and shops alternated with warehouses, burned and abandoned structures, and waste ground. Now and then, propelled by complaints from the aristocracy and orders from the Council of State, a virtual army of mounted law enforcers would sweep across the avenue and into the streets they so feared, making a show but having no actual plan and bringing back the few pitiful men they were able to catch and throwing them into prison. They then congratulated themselves and made voluminous optimistic reports to their minister. These forays did not halt or even particularly discourage those who robbed fine houses.

“There was a gate just beside me, there in that alley,” the Middle Captain had said, continuing his story. “I knocked with the bow, making a loud noise. And they let me in.”

The woman who opened the gate had seemed too refined for that neighborhood, and the Middle Captain was at once convinced that she served a lady who was hidden there. “It is always so intriguing,” he had explained to Aoi, “to come upon an unknown girl.”

Aoi did not need the explanation. He would have pushed into the little house, past blinds and curtains, and discovered the poor girl who lived there, very young, he said, an orphan, once of high family. One of her father's former stewards took rice and cloth from the manor he now managed for another and sent them to her, the woman who had been her nurse served in the house, and occasionally her grasping cousins would remember the poor daughter of their uncle and send boxes of fruit, or a few bolts of fine silk, but never coins or rice chits or floss for winter jackets and bedpads, the things she needed most. The Middle Captain had been wrung with pity, he said. He became her protector, and she was a great comfort to him.

“You see before you a modest man with nothing at all to rec-

commend him, but you would not believe how she smiles when I come, how happy she can be just because I am in the house. And I—" he swayed, shaking his head as if amazed "—I forget my troubles there, I become quite soft and easy." His face stilled as he remembered all the pressures of family and duty and desire. "I spend far too much time in that house in the alley."

Aoi roused herself to bring the conversation to its inevitable point. She wondered if the Middle Captain was actually as drunk as his disarranged clothing and occasional lapses into wordless grinning were meant to indicate. He had heard somewhere, she was beginning to think, of her reputation as a woman who knew medicines and herbs, who was often called to massage away the empress's headaches.

"And so," she said, guessing, "your lady of the alley is to give you a child."

He looked up in surprise, forgetting his lippish slack vacancy. "Why yes. But you see—" and he said what she had expected he would. "I cannot have, in my life, the complication of a child by this woman. My wife would forbid me the house; her parents would be unutterably sorrowful, but they never go against her. The lady of the Sixth Ward would throw away

my letters unread and tell the whole world I had deceived her. My father would likely . . ." Contemplation of what his father would do caused him such dismay that his voice died in his throat.

"And the lady, what does she think?"

"She has changed, she is afraid to receive me, she would not admit what has happened until I proved to her that I knew it. But her nurse insists that now I must make the relationship open and that at last they will be taken care of again. Now, when I go to that house, there is only weeping and persuasion. Something must be done." By his look Aoi understood that he thought he was asking her to help.

"You are young." By the light of the moon she could see raw self-involvement in his face, and the hope that he had appealed to the sympathy he seemed to think he found in her. "And the young are sometimes endowed with power beyond their capacity to manage. You have fathered a child, a not unexpected result of your actions, and now you are taken by surprise. You want to be rescued."

"Yes. If you could give me—"

"I use my knowledge for healing. If your lady is ill . . ."

"Ah."

"Yes. That is the way it is."

Principle is an affliction of many adults."

Aoi began to gather her skirts. She would help him in one way, she would make it easy for him to leave.

Later, just as she was about to lie on her cool straw mat with only a single pallet, she thought to herself, And don't let me hear that anything has happened to that lady of the alley.

In the morning O-hana brought warm water and helped Aoi refresh herself and put on the blue gauze robe that had hung airing on a stand all night.

"You know the Middle Captain?" Aoi said.

O-hana smiled. "Oh yes, the handsome one. He came by here last night, I think."

"You always know everything. That is why—" She told O-hana about the lady of the alley and asked her to find out who she was and where she lived.

"Are we to help?" O-hana said.

"No, no. We have no right, another influence there might be harmful. One must let the karma of others work itself out. But I am interested, though I should not be, and I want to assure myself that she comes through the pregnancy safely."

"I understand," said O-hana, and Aoi knew that before the day was out she would, through servant friends, be able to tell Aoi any detail, including what

was served for breakfast that morning in the little house.

Life in the royal palace was busy. The princess whom Aoi served as lady-in-waiting had come here because of a robbery and fire in her own house, and because her father, the Great Minister of the Left, was away on an inspection trip. The prince, so often neglectful or cross, enjoyed the novelty of having his principal wife at his side and found her taste admired by the whole court. "You have transformed these rooms," he said, "and the emperor's women are all jealous." Aoi received visitors and notes, was the one to move about while her mistress sat concealed by curtains on stands and fine bamboo blinds, the hems of her robes all that others were allowed to see. The obvious interest and appreciation of the court had both mellowed the princess in her attitude toward her husband, who was famous for adventures of an amorous nature, and caused him to recognize again the qualities that had so enthralled him during their ardent courtship. The weeks passed serenely, only occasionally disturbed by loud thrumming of the bowstrings of the guards when an intruder was discovered. Once there was a strong thunderstorm, and lightning struck near Kiyomizu Temple, starting a fire that

burned all night there on the hill, easily seen from the palace. For the next several nights fires deliberately set raged through the wooden buildings of the city, and it was heard at the palace that the mansion of a Major Counsellor had been completely destroyed, along with the adjacent block.

Then one morning O-hana said to Aoi, "There is a male person who wishes to speak with you."

"Unh? Why don't you bring him here?"

"He is not the kind of person who comes into the palace."

"The Combmaker? He has sent word? Of what?"

"Only that he has something to say."

"I see. I will go, then, to the princess's house. I can see how the repairs are progressing in the burned western wing."

"This afternoon?"

"Yes. He will be sober by then."

"Today that is not a problem," said O-hana.

He was a man who had made combs at the Eastern Palace Market, living with his wife and infant daughter in a flimsy construction on the fringe of the market itself. Aoi had admired his work, had bought many beautiful boxwood combs as gifts, and still owned one that had a decoration of pine needles.

His designs had been elegant, severe, and original, often using blackened silver set in thin strips flush into the pale, hard wood. Had been. For he no longer filed and polished combs. A fight between priests of rival temples had surged into his house and destroyed it. His wife and daughter were both killed beneath falling walls.

Now the Combmaker spent his days drinking and roaming the city. He had discovered a whole world of people of the streets—children who had lost their parents, destitute women, crippled men who couldn't work, others overcome, as he was, by circumstances and disaster. They knew everything that happened, all the secrets of the aristocracy, all the comings and goings of officials. They were everywhere, and they were invisible. Priests were his special target. He knew their flaws and delighted in exposing them.

A palace lady would normally have no contact with a man like the Combmaker, but his usefulness was known to the prince and a few others in the government, and he had once helped Aoi in a very serious matter.

She asked the princess for the use of a carriage. "I will stop by your house and see for myself how nearly ready it is."

The princess froze her expres-

sion. "Are you so eager to go home? I thought we were having such an interesting time here, where the finest people come and go every day. My steward is overseeing the repairs, and he reports regularly."

"No, no. It is just that I will be in the neighborhood."

The day was hot and cloudy. Aoi had, in fact, an errand in that ward, to visit an old scholar who had sent word that he was prepared to part with some of his books and had saved for her an old herbal scroll from the hand of Tamba Yasuyori. The scholar gave her cool, sweetened water and cucumber in miso sauce, but by the time the carriage had passed through several busy avenues to get to the princess's house, she was thirsty again, and her long hair, even bound as it was with ribbons, was a burden; her robes clung to her back and arms.

The steward met her, embarrassed that there were no women to offer refreshment and that she must pick up her skirts to avoid dust and shards of bamboo. The men on the other side of the garden were plastering walls, he said, almost daring to be cross that she intruded with her female standards of cleanliness and order into this man's world of vigorous work. Aoi peered across the garden pool, saw that the roof was solid again, that the

walls were the proper white of good plaster, that the floors were in a shocking state, and then asked to use a room on this side for a short rest. O-hana disappeared into the kitchen area and soon returned with cold water from the well.

Finding a curtain-screen, they settled Aoi on a straw cushion, lifted her hair and fanned, loosened the front of her clothes for coolness. Though she had often spoken to him face to face, Aoi had found that it was best to receive the Combmaker with a curtain between them until she saw how he was on that particular day. She arranged, however, a gap where the two halves of the curtain met through which she could see.

O-hana went to wait for him. She would, Aoi knew, bully him into at least splashing his face before she brought him to her.

Both door panels slid open, and the Combmaker was revealed, just taking his hand from O-hana's thigh. She, furious, gave him a push, and he approached on his knees. Fluid rags and wrappings enveloped him, seeming to flow in shadowy folds with each movement. His hair had escaped its topknot, his cheeks were dark with beard. He seemed to have gained weight, but that could be just the effect of the way he arranged his clothes. He could change his

shape, his posture, and even his height in this way.

He stopped just inside the room and bowed, toppling too far forward and knocking his head on the floor. "Ush," he said, and one eye flipped to the corner of its socket, as if jarred out of alignment by the blow. "Thish floor ish too aggressh—too aggresshish—too forward."

Aoi, laughing silently, waited.

"Jus' tryin' to show reshpec' and got kicked in the head." He advanced, sliding his knees in such a way that, if she hadn't known him to be whole, Aoi would have thought he had no legs below the thigh. "Reshpec' to thish—" He seemed to overbalance again and fell to the floor with a clatter of elbows and thud of ribs. "Ish." Slowly gathering himself, drawing his scattered parts painfully together, he muttered just under the breath, "Thish buzhhiness of reshpec'—" and completing the reassembly in front of her curtain, the eye wandered back to its focus, a smile of simple sweetness lit his face, and in the modulated voice of a courtier he said, "but I will put myself to endless trouble to greet the Lady Aoi," and bowed again.

Parting the two hangings, Aoi signaled to O-hana to remove the screen, hiding her smiles behind an open fan.

"So, lady, we meet again, so

soon after our recent adventure. This girl," he indicated O-hana, who sat beside the closed doors, "still pretends not to know me."

"Perhaps she knows you too well."

"But change, tell her, change is the essence of life." With a final rascally glance at O-hana, he straightened his face and turned to the reason he had sent word to Aoi. "You are interested, lady, in a certain young woman who lives in an alley?"

So O-hana had used the Combmaker and his band to find out about the Middle Captain's love. "You know of that affair, then?" said Aoi.

"Oh yes. The handsome guardsman saved his skin and lost his heart, all in that one day."

"He has been devoted?"

"Ah, at first. Not so much lately. He didn't like the newest development."

"But he still sees her?"

"Occasionally." He was silent, one hand clasped across his chest holding the opposite upper arm, his head bent down. "The eye that is open tends to see. That is what I always say. Yet there are times when . . ."

Aoi tensed. "Something has happened."

"Yes. I must tell you—I don't know why you have been interested in this lady, but I must tell you that she is dead."

To turn cold on such a hot day is not to notice the cold but to feel all warmth withdraw. "What happened?" she said, shivering.

"It was a robbery."

"Such a poor house, a tiny house in an alley, was robbed?"

"Oh, yes. Everyone is robbed these days. As I was robbed of all I cared about. The priests would say—the very ones who did the deed would say—that I shouldn't have tied myself so to the world. Those barren, haughty, duplicitious, supercilious, arrogant, overblown—"

Aoi, astonished at his vocabulary, waited until he ran down. It would do no good to remind him of the true piety and goodness of most priests.

"—fat pale slugs," he finished, "would preach to the Buddha himself. But yes, it was a robbery. A double robbery, in fact, because this morning, when it was discovered that there were only two dead women in the house, the people of the street went in and picked it clean."

"Who—"

"No one saw it, no one knows who did it, though the police have taken two men from that block. They were caught with a pile of folded robes and a packet of paper."

"Were there letters?"

"No letters."

Reluctantly Aoi asked the

next question. She was a practical woman who dealt with illness and injury, and she knew that, however much she wanted *not* to know, she must furnish her imagination with full details. "How did they die?"

Sorrowful, he said in a low voice that was muffled against his shoulder, "They were battered. It was a loathsome crime. The girl—the poor girl—bled to death from injuries inside. You understand me?" He looked up.

"From destruction of the pregnancy."

"Unh."

Aoi sat thinking. "I consider that there is not much doubt, from what you tell me, who did this—or caused it to be done. You are sure of your details?"

"I was there just after the bodies were found, I went in with the rest, for minutes only. Then I left to get word to you. If there had been letters I would have taken them."

"Then if you are sure about the clothes and the paper, we can prove, to the person concerned, what we know."

He said only, "Yes."

"I must return to the palace. Will you stay where O-hana can find you?"

The leer slipped back, the eye rolled wallward. "Ah, the shweet O-hana. She will alwaysh—I will alwaysh—If she would only

try to find the real Combmaker." The lisp had disappeared. He did not meet Aoi's eye.

"I wonder if you yourself know who he is," she said.

"I bow to your wisdom," and he was gone.

That evening Aoi spoke to the prince. She did not tell him anything of the lady of the alley, only that she had need to speak to the Middle Captain. "Perhaps he is on duty now," she said. "I wonder if you could . . ."

"Lady, you have interesting friends."

"He is not a friend. It is only that I have a message for him."

She waited in a small reception room. Darkness came, the blind was open to the garden. O-hana brought a small oil lantern and put it on the floor in the back of the room, then sat on her knees in a far corner. Insects set up a steady sound that seemed to increase as the summer progressed. Frogs at the edge of the lake in the main courtyard added sweet bell sounds. The moon had not risen, yet the pond of this small side garden reflected light from somewhere, bouncing globules of silver.

*Beneath the vine leaves
Careless crickets blindly sing,
Safe at home, they think.
Yet tall on stiff angled legs,
The mantis is poised to strike.*

The poem came without thought, and it was an image she disliked. Deep and unyielding as her anger was, she hated to ally herself with the realm of violence. It was one more of her worldly faults that she could not turn away.

He came wearing casual court dress. He had not, after all, been on guard; perhaps he did not, like the others, prefer night duty. Aoi knew a relaxation in her center. He was not armed. O-hana came forward and set out a cushion for him. Aoi would have been happy to see his bones suffer on the bare floorboards, but she wanted him to know that someone else was in the room.

After appropriate greetings he said, "I was told you have a message for me?"

"Ah yes. The kind of message you are not used to receiving. It concerns the lady you told me about, the defenseless young orphan who lived in an alley. You have heard what happened to her?"

She watched him struggle. It was only last night he had visited that house, a fighting staff in his hand, and struck the nurse as she led him inside. He had driven the end of his weapon into the offending part of the girl's body and, mad with unaccustomed passion for killing, hit again and again. He thought no

one knew. Shocked, he could not decide if he should admit knowledge of the deaths. All this showed clearly in his young, undisciplined face: the wish to deny, the instinct to run, the wish to grieve, contempt for the slight physical strength of the woman before him, the certainty that no message had come to him, the wild fear that he had somehow given himself away. Finally he forced anger to the front.

"This is a very private matter you speak of, with a servant in the room," he said.

"She knows."

"There is nothing to know, beyond a certain folly in involving myself with an inappropriate woman."

"Ah. Inappropriate. Don't pretend. She is dead, her nurse is dead. They were beaten to death, the work of robbers, it is said."

Now she had given him a clue, set him in the drama he had meant to create. He was launching into cries of grief, but she would not waste her time with that.

"That is what will be said. But the house was not robbed," Aoi said.

"Everyone knows—" he began.

"Robbers take what is valuable to them, what can be sold or traded. They are poor people—or were until they began climbing walls and setting

fires—and they have their own ideas of value."

He was pitiful in his confusion, in the strength of his fear for his reputation. Aoi could almost see the apparition of the perfect and unattainable lady of the Sixth Ward, she could see the high, pillared gate of the mansion of his wife's father, which would be locked against him, she could see his fellow guardsmen, ranked at roll call in their red coats and rough white pleated trousers, who would turn their backs, though they would not lay hands on him.

"There are no Doctors of Law to examine this case; in fact I am sure that they could not be brought to interest in the deaths of a girl and her woman. But I will tell you proofs known to me and to others. This morning when the bodies were discovered—by the tofu seller, by a passing neighbor who saw the gate ajar—others went in to take what the supposed robbers had left. And what did they come out with? Robes, paper. These could be sold and would never have been left behind by true criminals. But letters? Mere scraps of twisted and folded paper with ink marks on them? They were surely saved by a girl in love, a nurse who thought the young nobleman would acknowledge his child

and rescue its mother from poverty. They would mean only a way of making fire to a robber who cannot read. Yet there was not one letter in the house."

His eyes had half closed, his shoulders had risen, his hands clenched.

"You are full of violence," Aoi said, "released fully for the first time by the new training of the guards. It appeals to you, you have found in yourself a new power, you think you grow only now into full manhood, better than the mild men you see about you. You have used this power to solve a problem, and you develop pride."

Aoi's voice, dark with meaning and knowledge, had him hypnotized, and he swelled with mute rage. She flicked open a fan, the quick sharp snap of it making him flinch, expression of her own power—associate of royalty, respected woman in her own secure surroundings, favorite lady of the princess's father, who was the ablest minister in the government. The uselessness of his new strength enraged him further. He was on the point of exploding with a loud cry of frustration.

But Aoi was not finished with him. "Up north in Mutsu and Dewa," she said, and puzzlement stilled his emotions, "there is always trouble. The captive Ezo rebel, the farmers wrangle about fields, runaways combine with everyone who is discontented, there are attacks on the government storehouses."

She began to back away, moving on her knees beneath spreading skirts, the fan held before her face as if to ward off contamination. Her last words released him:

"If by tomorrow at noon I have not heard that you have left to join the army in Dewa . . ." The threat itself was as distasteful as the man threatened, and she knew she need not finish it. She turned to the back of the room, hearing pounding footfalls behind her that retreated along the verandah. "Bring wine. And then put out the light," she said to O-hana.

Perhaps in darkness she could tame the satisfaction that bloomed hot in her breast. If not, she hoped to burn it out with wine.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE GREEN HEART

Jack Ritchie



NOTE: Jack Ritchie's "The Green Heart," originally published in AHMM in 1963, was, we're proud to say, recently adapted into an Off-Broadway musical of which Newsday said, "New York hasn't had this jaunty a musical since the heyday of 'Little Shop of Horrors' . . . Irresistible!" Jack Ritchie, who died in 1983, was one of the masters of the short story and wrote more than one hundred tales for this magazine.—ED.

We had been married three months, and I rather thought it was time to get rid of my wife.

I searched the greenhouse and its shed, but they contained only such nontoxic items as grafting wax, powdered limestone, sphagnum moss, and the like.

I returned to the house. "Henrietta, where do you keep the poisons? I mean the sprays and things like that for the garden?"

"But, dear," my wife said, "we use the organic method. No sprays or chemicals of any kind. We enrich the soil nature's way with organic materials—leaves, grass clippings, and especially spoiled hay. A healthy soil produces healthy plants, and insects simply do not destroy healthy plants. What did you want the poison for, dear?"

"I saw a beetle on one of the shrubs."

She smiled mildly. "One mustn't kill beetles indiscriminately, William. So many of them are beneficial."

I studied her. "Henrietta, I've been meaning to ask you, just where do you buy those dresses you wear?" I had also meant to ask, "And why?" but I did not.

She glanced briefly at a mirror. "Every month or so I just phone Elaine's shop and have her send over three or four dresses."

"Don't you ever try them on before you buy them?"

"There's no need to, dear. Elaine knows my size." She looked down at her dress. "Do you like it, William?"

"It fits perfectly. However, the next time you feel the inclination to buy another dress, I think that we'd both better go to Elaine's and look over her stock first."

When my father departed this world, he left me an inheritance that was just short of adequate. By that I mean it was necessary for me to dip into my capital in order to exist in a civilized manner. During the course of fifteen years, that capital, of course, dimin-

ished to nonexistence. In short, at the time I met Henrietta, I lived on credit.

I have never felt that work is a duty, a pleasure, or a challenge, and I have always suspected that those who enjoy it are basically masochistic.

I had existed forty-five years without the necessity of stooping to labor, and I felt that it was manifestly unfair to expect me to do so now.

There remained one last recourse. Marriage.

I have never been against that institution for others. I realize that the average mind must occupy itself with something, whether it be labor, comic books, or marriage. However, I have always cherished my position of independence and the prospect of becoming a member of a "team"—even if that team consisted of only two people—was acutely depressing.

Yet I was penniless, and it was necessary for me to dip into marriage.

Once having arrived at that decision, I now attended the functions of my set with an appraising eye. Desperate though I was, I found myself rejecting one prospect after another. Eventually I extended my search to afternoon teas—and at one of them I first glimpsed Henrietta.

I was not impressed. Her clothes were not exactly out of fashion, but one had the impression that she had purchased them blindfolded. She was a small, fragile-appearing woman who sat alone in a corner, smiling faintly to herself, and one had the feeling that she had wandered in accidentally and now was not quite certain how to get out.

I had been stifling a yawn when Henrietta spilled her cup of tea.

The hostess's eyes darted like arrows. "Really, Henrietta!"

She blushed scarlet. "I'm sorry, Clara. I was thinking of something else."

Clara's shoulders twitched. "Why can't you be more careful? I've just had the rug cleaned."

It occurred to me that a woman who dressed as Henrietta did did so because she was either poor or too rich to care. When the chattering resumed, I turned to Hawley Purvis, who was sitting at my right. "Henrietta? Would she be one of the Bartons? The ones who lost practically all their money last year?"

"Good heavens, no!" Purvis said. "She's a Lowell. Has that fabu-

lous place on the Lakeview Road. Fifty acres or something like that and scores of servants."

"Married?"

"No. Never has been."

I stared across the room at Henrietta. A maid approached her with the teapot. Henrietta seemed alarmed at the prospect of again holding a full cup of tea. She was about to refuse, but she was too late. The maid poured.

Henrietta held the cup gingerly between the fingers of both hands.

I rubbed my jaw speculatively. Fifty acres? Scores of servants? I watched Henrietta covertly. She consumed half the cup of tea, and after five minutes her mind evidently wandered again. The cup slipped from her fingers, and the contents spilled over the rug.

Clara's face turned livid, and she shrieked. "Henrietta!"

This time Henrietta paled. If she could have fainted, I am positive she would have.

I rose and elaborately poured the contents of my own cup onto Clara's rug. "Madam," I said stiffly. "Take your damn rug to the cleaners and charge the bill to me." It was the moment for action.

I offered my arm to Henrietta we left.

The greatest obstacle to my marriage plans did not come from Henrietta but from her attorney, Adam McPherson.

I made his acquaintance one week after Henrietta and I announced our engagement. He came to my apartment, introduced himself, and then stared at me stonily. "How much do you want?"

"For what?"

"How much do you want to call off your marriage to Henrietta?"

I frowned. "Did she send you?"

"No. This is my own idea. I'm offering you ten thousand."

"If you will turn, you will find a door behind you. It is the way out."

He was not intimidated. "When I heard about you, I had you investigated. You are penniless and in debt to any number of establishments, including Curley's Rug Cleaning Service." His lips tightened. "You are marrying Henrietta for her money."

"Really? And what, besides the state of my finances, makes you so positive about that?"

"I have had your acquaintances polled. They unanimously agree that you are as capable of a tender emotion as a fish. A cold fish, they all specified." He reiterated his offer. "Ten thousand dollars."

What was a paltry ten thousand compared to Henrietta's mil-

lions? "Henrietta and I are deeply in love," I said firmly. "I would not part with her for less than . . . for *all* the money in the world."

"Twenty thousand."

"Never."

"Thirty. And that's absolutely final."

"So is my 'No.' Is this *your* money you are offering?"

"Yes."

"And what is your motive?"

"I do not want Henrietta to make a mistake she will regret all her life."

I ventured a guess. "Have you ever asked her to marry you?"

He nodded glumly. "About four times a year for the last twelve years."

"And her sentiments?"

"She regards me as a dear, trustworthy friend. Very depressing."

A thought suddenly brightened his face. "Do you *really* love Henrietta?"

I used a word strange to me. "Passionately."

He rubbed his hands. "Then of course you would have no objection to signing a document disclaiming all rights to Henrietta's money?"

"Henrietta would never consent to anything like that."

"I'll ask her."

"I'll wring your neck." I regained control of myself. "If it is your interest to see that Henrietta is happy, undoubtedly you have noticed that she has achieved a certain euphoria since I met her."

He admitted it reluctantly. Then he sighed. "All right. I will not oppose the marriage further."

"How good of you."

He studied me a moment. "Henrietta really needs to be protected."

I agreed. "She is rather simple."

He corrected me. "Ingenuous." He went to the door and then turned. "I suppose you know that she teaches at the university?"

I blinked. "Henrietta?"

"Yes. Associate professor. Botany. Donates her entire salary to charity."

So that was why she had never been home on weekdays except for the evenings. "She never told me."

"Probably forgot," McPherson said. "She's absentminded about some things."

Henrietta and I were married three weeks later. It was a small,

private ceremony marred only by the fact that McPherson arrived drunk and burst into tears as I slipped the ring on Henrietta's finger. She was excited and cried.

We spent our honeymoon in the Bahamas, where Henrietta collected an incredible number of ferns and various tropical vegetations for further study at home.

When we returned to her estate, I endured a week of bad service and poor food while I occupied my time by checking the household accounts.

The day Henrietta returned to teaching at the university I called the servants together. They regarded me with uniformly narrow eyes and a collective insolence.

I attacked the keystone first—the housekeeper. “Mrs. Tragger. Front and center.”

She folded her arms. “What is it?”

I smiled with infinite sweetness. “There is something about you that puzzles me. Why do you go about with that perpetual frown upon your face?”

She frowned.

I spoke gently. “I should think that you would be bubbly happy. Gay. Absolutely hilarious. Whistling day and night. After all, you have successfully managed to pad the household accounts to the sum of eighteen thousand dollars in the last six years.”

Her face darkened. “Are you accusing me of . . .”

“Yes.”

She glared. “I’ll sue immediately.”

“Please do. As soon as you are released from prison.”

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes, but she said, “You can’t prove a thing.”

It would have been difficult. However, I showed my teeth. “Madam, I *can* prove it to the satisfaction of any judge or jury. Yet I am inclined to be generous. Do you have a suitcase?”

She blinked. “Yes.”

“Splendid. Then pack it at once and leave. You are fired.”

She seemed about to utter something profane and devastating, but perhaps the nature of my smile changed her mind. She licked her lips and glanced at her audience. Finally she harumphed and stalked out of the room.

I turned next to the chauffeur, an unshaven creature who evidently slept in his uniform. “Simpson.”

“Yeah?”

"Do you think we ought to junk our cars?"

"Huh?"

"I really believe that in the interests of economy we ought to get rid of them—one and all. According to our records of gas consumption and mileage, I find that not one of them gives us more than one mile per gallon."

He shifted his feet. "Them figures are probably wrong somewhere."

"Possibly. But you need worry about them no longer. I presume that you too have a suitcase?"

He glowered. "Only Miss Lowell can fire me."

I smiled. "Miss Lowell is now Mrs. Graham, and if I find you on the grounds one hour from now, I shall regard you as a trespasser. I will not shoot you in the head. That is impenetrable. However, enough of you remains so that I cannot possibly miss."

I did not dismiss all of the servants—only seventy percent of them—and I had half of those replaced immediately by a reputable employment agency.

That evening dinner was on time, served flawlessly and satisfying to the palate.

Henrietta did not notice the food—she seldom does—but toward the end of the meal she happened to glance at the serving maid and frowned thoughtfully. "Are you new here? I haven't seen you before."

"Yes, madam."

Henrietta turned to me. "What happened to Tessie?"

"I dismissed her. Also quite a few of the others. I replaced some, but only those necessary to the proper functioning of this house. Was it essential for you to have *three* personal inadequate maids?"

"Three? I'm sorry, William. I didn't know I had *any*. Mrs. Tragger does all the hiring. And besides, I've never seen any of them. I dress myself." She looked at me hopefully. "Did you fire Mrs. Tragger?"

"Yes."

"And the chauffeur?"

"Yes."

Her gaze was one of profound admiration. "I was always a little . . . *afraid* . . . of them. Especially the chauffeur. He always seemed so put out when I asked him to drive me anywhere. So I always took a bus."

After a month I had the immediate estate functioning with reasonable efficiency and honesty on the part of the servants.

And now, at breakfast, I pondered my next step—independence, with wealth. And that called for the quite permanent disposal of my wife.

Poison? Yes, an agreeable method, but could I purchase any without having to sign some sort of a register?

I had never killed anyone, yet I had the feeling that I could murder with a certain equanimity. Not that I would linger for the death agonies, of course. I would tactfully leave the room.

"Dear," Henrietta said. "Have you ever thought of teaching?"

"Teaching?"

"Yes, dear. There's an instructorship in history going to be open this fall, and there seems to be no prospect of filling it. So many teachers have majored in the sciences lately. They consider it more patriotic, I suppose."

Rat poison? Somehow the idea seemed too plebeian.

"All you would need is a B.A.," Henrietta said. "And you have that. And I think it would be so nice if you and I left together for the university each morning."

"I haven't the slightest inclination to teach. I much prefer to spend my time learning."

"But just learning is selfish."

"Me? *Selfish*?"

"I don't mean you specifically dear," she said hastily. "I just meant that learning is *taking* and teaching is *giving*. And if you taught, you would feel useful."

"I dislike feeling useful. It is much too common." I suddenly remembered Ralph Winkler. Possibly he would have poison lying about his premises. He and I had been roommates in college, and he had majored in chemistry, or some such trade.

After breakfast I looked up Ralph's address in the phone book and arrived there forty-five minutes later. It was a painfully neat house set behind twenty-five feet of precise lawn.

Ralph poured coffee and settled back in his chair. "I haven't seen you at any of the alumni meetings."

"Ralph," I said. "I wonder if you might be able to lend me a little . . ."

His eyes clouded reminiscently. "Remember good old Gillie Stearns?"

"No. It doesn't necessarily have to be arsen . . ."

"He could wiggle his ears," Ralph said. "Became an anthropologist."

I glanced out of the window at what appeared to be apple trees.

"He's the one who wrote that term paper on the appendix," Ralph said.

"Who did?"

"Stearns. Nobody knows what the function of the appendix really is, but it was Stearns's theory that the way to have a healthy appendix was to wiggle . . ."

"I see you're quite a gardener," I said.

"Orchardist. I have five apple trees, two peach, and one pecan." He frowned slightly. "The pecan doesn't seem to produce."

"Aren't you supposed to have *two* pecan trees?"

"I never thought of that."

"Ralph," I said. "Do you spray? I mean your fruit trees? Often?"

I had touched his subject. He rose enthusiastically. "William, follow me."

I took my cup along.

He led me through the house, into the back yard, and to the garage. He selected a key from an impressive ring and unlocked the door. "I keep the car parked on the street. Not enough room in here." He opened the door and stepped aside. "See for yourself, William."

I received the immediate impression that I had entered a combination garden shop and pharmacy. A riding mower, a tractor, and various accessory attachments occupied the floorspace. The shelves lining one entire side were filled with bottles, jars, cans, and cartons. An assortment of manual sprayguns hung on the walls. "How big is your place, Ralph?"

"A full quarter of an acre."

My eyes ran over the shelves, and I made a random choice. "What's in that little red can in the corner?"

"Just about the strongest stuff I have," he said proudly. "It'll kill anything." He pointed to a gas mask and a rubber suit hanging on a peg. "I have to wear that when I spray. Can't leave an inch of skin exposed."

I stared at the can. "And you spray this poison on your apples?"

"You've never seen better ones in your life, William. Not a sign of sooty blotch, calyx end rot, or Brooks fruit spot."

"And you eat these apples?"

"Perfectly safe. The spray eventually washes off through wind and weather. Besides, I always peel the ones I eat."

I finished my coffee and handed him the cup. "Would I be imposing if I asked for a refill? I'll wait here and browse."

While he was gone, I pried open the red can with a screwdriver. The contents were a sickly yellow dust. I filled an envelope, gingerly licked the flap to seal it, and put it back into my pocket.

Ralph returned with my cup "Remember good old Jimmy Haskins?"

"No." I took the cup. "What do you think about the organic method of raising apples?"

A chill descended. "Most unscientific."

"We have about forty apple trees on our place," I said. "We never spray."

His lips tightened. "There are all kinds of people in this world."

I had the impression that he regretted bringing me the coffee. There was no point in departing on such a frigid note. I searched my memory and then chuckled.

"Remember good old Clarence? The one we all said could get his haircut in a pencil sharpener?"

"Yes," Ralph said coldly. "He's my brother."

I did not, of course, intend to poison Henrietta in our own home. That would lead to the inevitable autopsy and the equally inevitable electric chair.

But an earlier conversation with Henrietta had given me a splendid idea.

"Dear," she had said. "Every summer I go on a field trip for a week or two. Would it be all right if I went this year?"

I had been about to tell her that I had no objections—providing that she did not expect me to go with her—but then a thought had occurred to me. "Where will you be going?"

"It would be a canoe trip, William," she had said. "The Minnesota woods."

"You've been taking trips like this alone?"

"Oh no. I usually go with some of my students. But this year I was hoping that . . . that just you and I could go. We could hire a guide if you think we'd need one, but actually I don't think that would be necessary if we didn't wander from our camp."

The idea of battling mosquitoes was not inviting, but I smiled. "Of course I will go with you. And we will not require a guide."

My problem had been solved. We would be alone in the middle of nowhere. I would simply kill her and bury her.

Then I would inform the authorities that my wife had wandered away from our camp and been lost. There would be a search, of course, but Henrietta would not be found.

And the actual method of the murder itself? I had dallied with shooting, stabbing, strangling, and bludgeoning. I eventually rejected them all. They required a primitive violence that is foreign to my nature. This morning I finally decided that poisoning was the civilized procedure.

When I returned from Ralph Winkler's home, I put the poison under lock and key.

In the evening, as usual, Henrietta brought her notes and reference books into the living room and worked on her latest paper for the *Botany Journal*. I put a stack of records on the phonograph and settled under a lamp for another review of Henrietta's accounts.

After a while I turned in my chair. "Henrietta, there's one item that keeps recurring. Every month you withdraw two thousand dollars from one of your bank accounts. The money seems to disappear. At least I can't find any accounting for it."

Henrietta hesitated. "I'm afraid it's blackmail, dear."

"Blackmail?" Perhaps I had underestimated her. "What in the world have you done to be blackmailed for?"

"Nothing, dear. It's because of Professor Henrich. You see, he and his wife adopted a child. Only it wasn't through a regular agency. Blackmarket, they call it. And they thought that everything was fine. But a year later a man came to them and claimed that he was the child's father. He seemed to have evidence to prove it and he wanted the baby back unless . . ."

It was obvious. "Unless Professor Henrich paid?"

"Yes. First it was one hundred dollars a month, and then gradually he was paying five hundred. But the professor and his wife simply couldn't afford that for long. They had to dip into their savings, and when those were gone, Professor Henrich came to me to borrow money. He more or less broke down and told me the entire story. And so I took over the payments."

"You took over the payments? How could Henrich possibly allow you to do something like that?"

"But he doesn't really know what I'm doing, dear. I just told him that I'd talk to Smith—that's the name of the blackmailer. And later I told the professor that I'd managed to frighten Smith away by threatening to go to the police."

"But obviously you didn't."

"No. I thought it over and realized that there wasn't any actual *proof* that Smith was a blackmailer. He always insisted on cash from the professor. And so if I failed to *prove* to the police that Smith was a blackmailer, he might become very angry with my interference and actually take the child back. I was in a dilemma, and money seemed to be the only way out."

"Five hundred dollars at first? And then more and more? Until today it is two thousand dollars a month?"

"Yes, dear."

I rubbed my forehead and eyes. "Don't you realize that eventually it will be three thousand? Four?"

She shook her head. "No. Two thousand is my absolute limit. I told him so when he asked for two thousand five hundred. He seemed disappointed, but he accepted the situation." She smiled. "I can be very firm when I want to."

I had difficulty speaking. "Just how much have you given this contemptible wretch?"

"I'm not positive. About fifty thousand dollars by now, I imagine."

"*Fifty thousand dollars* of my . . . of *our* money? To a man who neither sows nor reaps?"

She nodded. "That reminds me, William. You'd have only three classes a day. That's because instructorships are usually given to students who are also working for advanced degrees, and the university doesn't want to overload them. Would you like to work for your M.A., too?"

"When are you going to see Smith again?"

"He comes here the first Monday of each month. He's very prompt, and he always phones me on the Sunday before to remind me to get to the bank for the cash Monday morning."

I went to the liquor cabinet and made myself a stiff drink. "When he phones next, let me talk to him."

The call came Sunday afternoon, and Henrietta handed the phone to me.

"Would you please leave the room, Henrietta," I said. "I am always a bit embarrassed when I reason with people."

When she was gone, I spoke into the mouthpiece. "You've received your last cent, you miserable parasite."

"Who the hell are you?"

I explained precisely and then added, "I control every penny that leaves this house, and you are no longer included in our charities."

"In that case I'll take the kid away from the professor."

"I doubt very much if you can. Your references aren't exactly the best—as Professor Henrich and his wife, and I and mine, will gladly testify in any court."

"Look, mister, I can still make a lot of trouble. A lot of trouble."

"You are welcome to try." But then something occurred to me. A man deprived of a two thousand dollar a month income has a tendency to turn ugly. Undoubtedly he would keep an eye on us. And when Henrietta disappeared, would he put two and two together? Blackmailers are notoriously suspicious. Would he approach me and demand money for silence? And if I did not pay, would he see to it that I was caused considerable embarrassment with the police? Would he cause the authorities to resume the search for Henrietta a bit more diligently—with an eye directed toward the sub-surface of our last encampment?

There is only one way to deal with a blackmailer—be he real or potential.

"Just one moment," I said. "Do you have proof that you are the father of the child? Real proof?"

"The professor saw the papers."

"But I haven't. I doubt if you have any proof at all. But if you do, bring it here Monday evening. No proof, no money." I hung up.

I explained to Henrietta that I wanted to see Smith alone when he came—to further reason with him—and on Monday evening she returned happily to the university to attend a lecture on the shallow root systems of the sequoias.

When she was gone, I saw to it that the servants retired to their quarters and then went to the liquor cabinet in the study.

I opened the envelope containing Winkler's yellow powder. How much of this stuff was sufficient to kill a human being? I didn't know. I solved the problem by pouring the entire contents into a bottle of scotch.

Smith arrived at eight thirty. He was a somewhat bulky man with long arms, and his hairline initiated approximately one inch from his eyebrows. He was expensively, if not tastefully, dressed.

I closed the door of the study behind us. "The proof, please."

He revealed marigold yellow teeth and removed a revolver from his pocket. "This is just so you don't get any funny ideas." Then he put the gun back into his pocket and handed me an envelope.

I examined the contents. The papers were originals, not photo-stats, and apparently authentic. I wandered over to the liquor cabinet as I studied a hospital birth record. I made myself a bourbon

and soda and then looked up as though I'd suddenly remembered he was still there. "A drink?"

"What you got?"

"Scotch?"

"That's it."

I poured a generous glass and handed it to him. He drained the entire contents and smacked his lips. "Good stuff."

That confirmed a suspicion of mine. People who drink scotch have no sense of taste.

He extended the glass. "How about making that wet again?"

"Gladly." His simian aspect reminded me of good old Gillie Stearns, and I asked a question. "Can you wiggle your ears?"

He seemed a bit saddened. "Used to be able to. But ever since my appendix got took out, I lost the touch."

When I noticed that his coloring seemed to verge toward purple, I hastily put the papers back into the envelope and returned them. "These seem to be in order. And now if you'll excuse me, I'll get you the cash. I have it in the library safe." His color grew worse.

I went to the library and sat down. I finished a pipe and then returned to the study.

Smith lay on the floor, quite dead, and it appeared that his departure had not been a pleasant one.

I withdrew the envelope from his pocket and then slung him over my shoulder. I carried him through the french doors to the automobile he'd parked in the circular driveway.

I drove toward the outskirts of the city, following a bus line. When the area seemed relatively unpopulated, I turned off and parked the car.

I walked back a half a dozen blocks before I boarded a bus.

Perhaps Smith's picture would appear in the newspapers when his body was found. If it did, and Henrietta noticed it, I would explain that a man like Smith undoubtedly had many enemies and that one of them had killed him. I felt confident that she would accept that explanation.

At Fremont Street I left the bus and walked the two blocks to Ralph Winkler's home. He opened the door and regarded me with distinct inhospitality.

"Ralph," I said. "We're having a little trouble with field mice in our apple orchard."

His economic smile indicated vindication. "So organic gardeners have field mice problems?"

"I'm afraid so. I wonder whether you might have something potent . . . some chemical . . . that might enable us to get rid of them?"

I was welcome instantly. He stepped aside, and we journeyed through the house and to his garage.

He surveyed his pharmacy. "What'll you have? I've got compounds here that will throw mice into convulsions."

I recalled the messy decline of Smith. "Basically I'm a humanitarian. Do you have something gentle yet still lethal?"

He was disappointed in me. "Very well. I suppose I have something like that here . . . somewhere. But you really should try Cycloclodidan. I use it all the time."

"Do you have field mice?"

He nodded glumly. "Can't seem to get rid of them."

When Henrietta returned at eleven that night, I told her that Smith would never bother her or Professor Henrich again. "Threatened him with the police and twenty years in prison. He left here shaken, trembling, and penitent."

Henrietta gazed at me admiringly. "You seem to be able to get things done, William. I feel so safe with you."

During the week Henrietta usually lunches at the university, but at twelve thirty the next day she came home breathless and smiling like a child. She waved an envelope. "It's been accepted."

"What has?"

"*Alsophilia grahamicus*."

"*Alsophilia grahamicus*?"

"A tropical tree fern, William. I discovered it during our honeymoon, and when I couldn't classify it, I realized that it might be a true species. So I named it after you—that's the *grahamicus* part—and sent it to the Society for verification."

I rolled the words on my tongue. "*Alsophilia grahamicus*." Rather pleasing. Perhaps I might yet become a footnote in some book—my bid toward immortality.

"Are you pleased, William?"

"That was very thoughtful of you."

"I'm having the tip of one frond put into a plastic token so that you can wear it always."

That evening Adam McPherson appeared for dinner. It had been his habit to do so the first Tuesday of every month for the past ten years, and after our marriage Henrietta had still chosen to honor the standing invitation.

I met him at the door. "McPherson, I want a word with you."

He regarded me for a moment. "Really? What a coincidence. It was my intention to speak to you, too." He glanced about. "Where is Henrietta?"

"Upstairs grading some term papers."

I led him into the study and came directly to the point. "McPherson, you are Henrietta's lawyer and comptroller. Surely you must have been aware that prior to my appearance this household was run in a most strange manner—padded payrolls, superfluous servants, astronomical household expenses."

He nodded. "Of course."

My eyes narrowed. "And yet you did nothing about it?"

"Why should I? After all, I am the one who was responsible for the entire glorious arrangement."

"You baldly *admit* that?"

"Certainly." McPherson went to the liquor cabinet and surveyed the contents. "It was quite a profitable arrangement for me. Kick-backs, you know." He looked back at me. "Henrietta is an excellent botanist, but she has no accounting ability whatsoever. And she trusted me."

I felt the impulse to strangle. "I do not care how messy this is going to be, I intend to prosecute."

He was not perturbed. "If you do, I shall see that you join me in prison—or possibly worse. For murder."

I was, of course, temporarily quieted.

He brought forth a bottle and a glass. "Several years ago I noticed that Henrietta regularly withdrew five hundred dollars from one of her bank accounts. It was a relatively insignificant sum, but she seldom uses cash and I became curious. I asked her about it, and when she proved uncharacteristically evasive, I questioned the servants—who were under my command, so to speak—and eventually ascertained the existence of Mr. Smith. Further investigation on my part—if one may use that term for eavesdropping, established the reason for his monthly visits."

McPherson poured liquor into his glass. "Smith had a limited imagination. He was apparently satisfied with five hundred dollars. But I was not." He smiled. "Therefore I approached him with the proposal of prison or cooperation. Naturally he chose cooperation. Of the two thousand he eventually received monthly from Henrietta, one went to me."

I stared at the bottle he still held in his hand. It was the scotch that had eliminated Smith. I had forgotten to dispose of it.

McPherson put the bottle back on the shelf. "When Smith informed me that you wanted to see him personally, I wondered what you were up to now—after all, you had already ruined one of my sources of income. And so I drove here last night, parked on the street, and waited for him to come out of your house. It was my intention to question him immediately about his meeting with you." He smiled. "His car came out of the driveway, but you were driving." He looked at his glass and then at me. "Can I make you a drink?"

"No, thank you," I said. "But by all means, please help yourself."

He savored and then finished the contents of his glass. He coughed appreciatively and reached for the bottle again. "I followed you. And when you walked away from Smith's car, I looked inside. Smith lay on the floor, obviously dead. I did not pry into the manner of his death and left immediately. How did you kill him?"

"I stabbed him in the back," I said.

He smiled. "Please do not attempt the same with me. I am wary and will remain at arm's length." He tried to stay alert.

And now I smiled. "I cannot expose you without being exposed myself? And so it is your intention to resume bilking Henrietta's estate? With my passive cooperation?"

He nodded. "Exactly."

I noticed that his complexion was changing to a more colorful hue. "We will discuss this further after dinner," I said pleasantly. "And now I shall see if Henrietta is ready."

I retired to the library, smoked a pipe, and returned to the study.

McPherson was dead.

I removed his car keys from his pocket and carried his body to his car outside. I deposited him in the trunk compartment and parked the car on the street.

I returned to the house just as Henrietta came down the stairs. "Is Adam here yet?"

"No, my dear."

She smiled. "He's rather fond of me. It was very thoughtful of him to cry at our wedding."

We delayed dinner half an hour and then sat down without him.

At ten that evening when I went out for a walk, I disposed of McPherson's car in the same manner I had used for Smith and returned by bus.

Henrietta was considerably shocked when she read of McPherson's death.

son's death, and the police were puzzled. Henrietta recovered, but the police remained puzzled and the days passed.

At the end of the semester, Henrietta and I packed and drove north to the Minnesota lake country. We rented a canoe, purchased supplies, and bravely proceeded into the wilderness on a warm Saturday afternoon.

Since we proceeded downstream, the paddling was not particularly tedious, and the first hour passed pleasantly.

However, as we approached the first white water, I realized, a bit too late, that the occupation of running rapids is a bit specialized.

I would gladly have paddled to shore and portaged, but I found that we were in the grip of the current. We had no choice but hold on and attempt to steer.

We safely rode two-thirds of the rapids, and I had reached a faint optimism, when suddenly a jagged rock appeared directly ahead. I endeavored frantically to avoid it. However, the after end of the canoe smashed into the obstruction, and we turned over.

I found myself tumbling in the rushing water, grasping wildly for some handhold, but my fingers merely slipped off the wet rocks.

Suddenly I found myself falling. I plunged deep into the water. When I fought my way to the surface, I discovered that I had successfully passed all obstacles and now floated in a relatively quiet pool at their base. Then I relaxed.

I swam to shore, climbed the bank, and looked back upstream. Henrietta clung to an outcropping of rock just before the drop to the pool. She was pale, and her eyes looked toward me for help.

I shouted. "Henrietta, let go of that rock. You'll be carried into the pool below. It's perfectly safe."

She looked down and then at me. "But I can't swim."

I blinked. *She couldn't swim?*

I felt my heart beating. This was the opportunity! There would be no need for poison. There had been a canoe accident, and she had drowned. It was as simple as that.

And I would walk back to the nearest habitation and tell the story.

I raised my voice again. "Hold your breath, and let go of that rock. I'll be waiting down below, and I'll bring you to shore."

I took off my soaking shoes, my trousers, and my shirt. Then I smiled at her and waved my hand. "All right. Let go."

She did not hesitate.

The current caught her, and she plunged over and down into the pool.

I turned my back toward the water. All I would have to do now was wait. How long? Five minutes? Ten?

I looked down at my clothes. The round plastic token containing the tip of frond had fallen out of my pocket and lay on the grass. *Al-sophilia grahamicus*.

I found myself trembling.

I had killed Smith and McPherson, and they had deserved to die. But does one kill a child?

A child? Yes, a child-woman and she loved me. And in my own way I had grown rather . . .

I cursed savagely and plunged into the water.

I found Henrietta immediately and brought her to the surface. She was still obeying my injunction to hold her breath, though rather desperately.

I grasped her and began backstroking towards the shore. "You may breathe now, Henrietta. But only through your mouth. Not your nose. Taste the air, and if it has water in it, spit it out and try again."

When we reached shore, we sat in the sun. But it was still a bit cool, and so I held her.

She looked up at me. "I'll always be able to depend on you, won't I, William? All the rest of my life?"

I almost sighed. "I'm afraid so."

And in September I would probably be teaching at the university. Suddenly I looked forward to it.

For back issues, send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2.00 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



M. D. Lake's ninth novel to star campus cop Peggy O'Neill is **Midsummer Malice** (Avon, \$5.99), an absorbing tale telescoped into a few heart-stopping days, unfolding from two major points of view—that of the wisecracking campus cop whose gut tells her that a suicide was actually murder and that of the unwitting woman targeted as the next victim. It begins on a sultry summer night when Peggy relaxes on the upper deck of the university's summer theater showboat listening to a "hypothetical" account of a young girl who sold her newborn baby some twenty years earlier. Events move swiftly as the birth mother earnestly tries to determine the wisdom of locating, and identifying herself to, her daughter. As her search widens, it pulls in others from the past—including a killer intent on preventing the reunion. A story that grows out of its characters, a rich and memorable group of folks who each add to the mounting suspense. It should draw new fans for Lake and please the legions already looking forward to the return of her stubborn, redheaded sleuth.

J. A. Jance's Arizona sheriff Joanna Brady makes her latest appearance in **Skeleton Canyon** (Avon, \$23), the fateful meeting place for a star-crossed pair of teenage lovers; for one, it's also a final resting place. Jance's Southwestern mysteries show up on best-seller lists; one can see why. A large cast of characters and multiple threads twisting into a knotty plot are in counterpoint to the details of Joanna's personal life and her relationships with her daughter, friends, and law enforcement colleagues. All stand out in relief against the beauty and danger of the desert region that's the backdrop to her story. Thoroughly satisfying entertainment.

Prolific sf/fantasy author Sheri Tepper keeps finding time to add

to her two mystery series penned under the names of B. J. Oliphant and A. J. Orde. The latest in the latter group is **A Death of Innocents** (Fawcett, \$5.99) starring Jason Lynx, a likeable Denver antiques dealer. The reader finds Jason and Grace newly married and gratified at finding their dream house, an abandoned but irresistible old mansion on a large, secluded city lot. They begin its restoration, only to discover the skeletal remains of a murdered child beneath the floorboards. Jason and his policewoman wife are determined to catch a killer who has escaped justice for more than twenty years. In the club of amateur sleuths, Jason Lynx is a civilized and witty member in very good standing.

Laura Joh Rowland has chosen late seventeenth century Japan as the setting for **The Way of the Traitor** (Villard, \$24). Through the machinations of a powerful enemy at court, samurai Sano Ichiro and his assistant are dispatched to Nagasaki to spend months observing and then to report back. Privately, Sano knows that his enemy's hopes lie in the dangers of that city: religious intolerance, deadly politics, and greed that has led to limited trade with Dutch "barbarians." Right on cue, Sano arrives in port only to discover that one of the Dutchmen has disappeared and finds himself with the impossible task of learning the truth before any of a number of opposing factions can find fault with him first. Some readers may find it a challenge to empathize with Sano, a man concerned with honor but also plagued by doubts about the worthiness of his lord. He is, after all, a man of his time, the product of a very different culture. There is an intriguing murder, however, and no one can fault Rowland for the period detail or a fascinating glimpse into the Japanese/Dutch arrangement that allowed men to overcome some of the obstacles of the day in their quest for prosperity.

Another historical mystery is the latest Dame Frevisse novel by Margaret Frazer, **The Prioress' Tale** (Berkley, \$5.99), set in a medieval priory. The rules imposed by the nuns' religious beliefs and the feudal laws governing England will be familiar to most readers, while characters like the clever wandering minstrel and the innocent, beautiful daughter of a wealthy merchant initially appear to assume their accustomed roles in the drama. Frazer develops full-bodied characters, however, who can surprise the reader even as they act out the author's fair-play plots. The intelligent and devout Dame Frevisse is a durable protagonist who grows with each book as she works out the details that reveal a murderer's heart. May Frazer and the good Dame Frevisse continue their good works.

Todd Mills makes his third appearance in a novel one isn't likely to forget quickly, R. D. Zimmerman's **Hostage** (Delacorte, \$21.95). Todd, a Minneapolis on-camera reporter for a local network station, was thrust out of the closet in the first book in this series. Now he's assigned to interview the visiting Johnny Clariton, a political figure whose right-wing opinions have catapulted him to national prominence. Meanwhile, a desperate group of AIDS sufferers has carefully planned his kidnapping in a move designed to force him to change sides. Mills finds himself in the eye of the storm, his loyalties cruelly torn, when his own hunt for the abducted victim appears to lead him to a loved one. A tough, uncompromising story with a sympathetic hero, mesmerizing in its frankness and its pitiless look at the pain, the people, and the politics surrounding AIDS.

Dr. Susan Shader is a Chicago psychiatrist and psychic who works with the police. In Joseph Glass's **Eyes** (Villard, \$23), she's called in to locate a serial killer of young female athletes. At first it looks as if she and her buddy, Detective David Gold, have found him, but like several other false climaxes in this big, surprising book, the arrest was premature; when the man commits suicide in jail, she has not only a killer to unearth but a load of guilt to assuage. Author Glass has taken an old premise and given it so many yanks and twists that this reader wondered how it could ever end. Finally, though, Susan must come face to face with a coldblooded genius who's eluded a number of powerful law enforcement agencies for decades. Once begun, **Eyes** is mighty hard to put down.

Nantucket is the setting for Francine Matthews' third book in her series starring Detective Merry Folger; **Death in a Mood Indigo** (Bantam, \$22.95). When two children unearth a skeleton on the beach, she is assigned to identify the victim and determine whether foul play was involved. Meanwhile, the Massachusetts police have arrested a man for attempted kidnapping and are building a case against him as a longtime serial killer who has strangled at least five women. The expert consulting for the state learns that Merry's skeleton was also strangled. Another brutal murder of an island girl leaves Merry still unconvinced, however, that she should turn over her case; she's now identified her victim as a wealthy woman who apparently disappeared the same night a local artist sank with his sailboat miles offshore in a storm. She believes that those two island deaths are related. A plucky heroine, carefully detailed supporting characters, and a picturesque island backdrop all support a clever plot and an action-packed finale.

THE STORY THAT WON

The June Mysterious Photo-David A. Rooney of Natick, mentions go to Andy Dequa-Frank Peirce of College Sta-low of Tacoma, Washington; Virginia; Alfred W. Cross of James Hagerty of Melbourne, Ohio; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Greg Goodwin of Amarillo, Texas; and Connie Coleman of Trimble, Tennessee.



graph contest was won by Massachusetts. Honorable sie of Pownal, Vermont; tion, Texas; Homer B. Mar-Judith Bell of Lynchburg, Sacramento, California; Florida; Dick Saxe of Toledo, Ohio; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Greg Goodwin of Amarillo, Texas;

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

DOWN THE PRIMROSE PATH by David A. Rooney

Click. Steve took another step back, trying to get more of the statuary into the shot. His hands trembled slightly as he thought of the riches that would soon be his if he could just find the three identical pedestals out of the two dozen erected in the park. Triangulation, that was the key.

Click. Linda squinted through the viewfinder. Well, it *looked* like a raven to her, but the weathering on the statue made it hard to be sure. She took a step back to try for a better angle. The day was hot, but the thought of all that money, buried somewhere in the park, made it tolerable.

Click. Steve smiled to himself, despite the heat. The old guy at the town flea market who had sold him Captain Quigley's ship's log had to be stupid not to recognize what the last few entries had meant. Five hundred dollars was nothing compared to what was promised in the pirate's diary. Well, sucker, finders, keepers.

Click. Linda grinned to herself as she remembered conning that old geezer at the town flea market into selling her that gangster moll's diary. Typical of a man not to understand what the woman's last few entries had meant. No doubt he thought her a foolish romantic, but it would be three hundred dollars well spent if she could find that damn bird among the park statuary.

Click. Steve smiled. Stupid old man.

Click. Linda grinned. Stupid old man.

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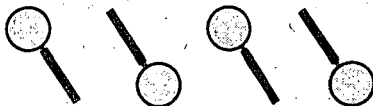
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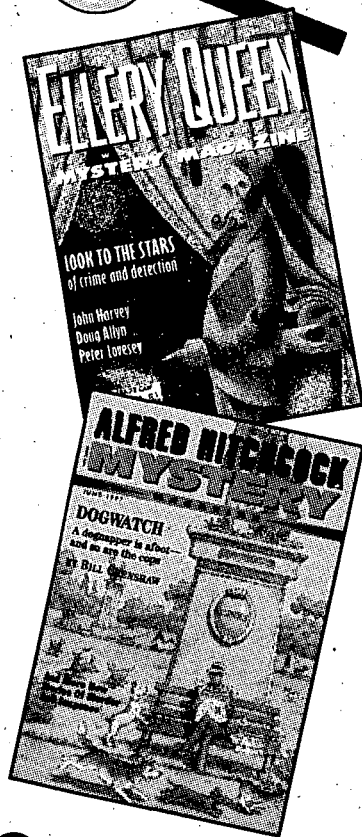
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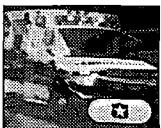
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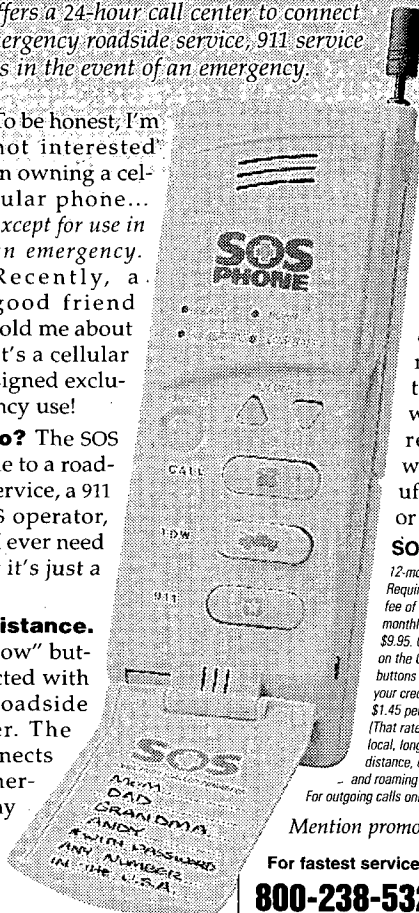
the SOS Phone—it's a cellular phone service designed exclusively for emergency use!

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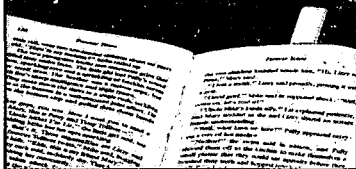
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